

FINDING A NEW CONFESSION OF FAITH  
BY  
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A DEMONSTRATION PROJECT

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ABSTRACT  
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The statistics don't lie. The "Nones" are rising. Those who are refusing to choose a particular faith, attend a particular church, or worship a particular god. And the generation leading the charge is the Millennials. But the story that's not being told is that the young adults who *are* going to church, have a lot of the same issues with religion as their peers. You may see them in the pews every Sunday, but they are having a hard time professing their particular faith and confessing their particular God.

As Associate Pastor of Fifth Avenue Presbyterian Church located in New York City at a crossroads of many diverse faith communities and secular institutions, I have seen that Young Adults are claiming membership in the Christian tradition without being able to confess the particularities of their Christian faith resulting in an uninformed and unsustainable religious and spiritual identity. To combat this growing issue, my demonstration project will develop a pedagogical process that will result in the development of a Millennial Book of Confessions.

To my fellow Millennials who  
dared to dismantle their fragile faith systems,  
unabashedly asked questions of themselves and the church,  
wrestled with God,  
made room for the Spirit,  
never settled for easy answers,  
learned to say, “I don’t know,”  
engaged in the arduous task of asking, “Why?”,  
fell in love with Jesus again and again and then again.

This project is for you.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

There are so many people who made this project possible and they have my unending gratitude and appreciation.

To my amazing Site Team, for always supporting me when I was exhausted, struggling or in need of some love and encouragement, I thank you. Throughout the years, you have reminded me why the church needs me to finish my project and for that, I owe you more than Prosecco and Starbursts.

To my family, thank you for serving as my unofficial Site Team. Whether it was over dinner or on text, you were the ones who endured conversation after conversation about the future of faith for Millennials and the universal church. You might not be ordained pastors, but you sure are pastoral, and for that, I owe you my enduring support in all of your endeavors, big and small.

To my colleagues, there were days that my office door remained closed for hours on end. Then there were days that I was running up and down the hallway, making copies and asking for advice. Thank you for putting up with every frazzled version of me throughout this process.

To Dr. Dale Irvin and Dr. Wanda Lundy, your guidance, wisdom and patience has been more than I could have ever asked for or hoped for. Every time I felt like the task was too unclear, the project was too much, or that I wasn't enough, you set me back on track and for that, I am forever grateful and humbled. Thank you.

To Jordan, for being my inspiration, and to Amelie, for being my hope for future generations. I hope the church will one day be the place you find Jesus.

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## INTRODUCTION

I know you're scared. I am too. The church is shrinking. Our congregations are dying. Our traditions are becoming obsolete. And the most bleak of all the realities that face our communities of faith, is that the rising generation of elders, deacons, trustees, and pastors is one of the most "un-churched generations" history has ever seen. Sure, everyone leaves the church at one point in their life or another, but these 20 and 30 somethings, known as the Millennial generation, are showing no signs of coming back.

So what are we, the leaders of the Presbyterian Church of the United States of America, doing about it? Are we telling them to take us or leave us, or are we begging them to give us just one more chance? From what I have observed, most of us are doing the latter. We are doing everything in our power to get those who are still coming out on Sundays to stay and we are also doing everything in our power to get those who are on the fringe to come back. And how are we doing this? By selling a version of Christianity we think Millennials will find "cool" or "like" on their Facebook pages. And what is the result? Well those young adults who are still coming out on Sundays have no idea what *they* believe and the ones on the fringe have no idea what *we*, the church, believes. And here we are in the center of a denomination-wide identity crisis.

I'll admit that I have a vested interest in this growing issue. Not only am I a Presbyterian minister with roots in this tradition that go back to the early 1900's in pre-divided Korea, but I am also a card carrying Millennial. This means that I intimately

understand every frustration, doubt, and fear my generation has with organized religion, but I even more so believe in the power of the Gospel to save and give hope to a people in need. I have seen my fellow 20/30 somethings use church like the newest dating website instead of as a genuine community of believers. I have seen my Christian friends go through all the hardships that life has to throw us at this stage of our lives and not have any of the spiritual tools needed to overcome them.

So consider this project a treatise of sorts to the church of today to stop trying to placate my generation into accepting a hollow shell of Christianity, but rather to go back to the basics of what makes us believers in the Gospel, followers of Christ, and members of the church. Consider this project a letter from an actual Millennial giving you permission to do church not on our terms, but on the Spirit's terms. Consider this project a note of gratitude from the young adults in your midst, thanking you for trying to speak to us in our language but promising you that the timeless prose and poetry of Scripture are good enough. Consider this project a word of encouragement from a fellow Presbyterian pastor assuring you that the church isn't going anywhere because God isn't going anywhere.

Thank you for taking the time to go on this journey with me. All praise be to the God who creates and recreates, Jesus who resurrects and redeems, and the Spirit who inspires and enlivens. Amen.

## CHAPTER 1

### SEX/CHURCH/GOD AND THE CITY

*My attitude toward God will evolve over time, but what will stay the same is my desire to be thankful for every moment in which God has bound me up like this...*

*My idea of living a Christian life is to be grateful to God by spending every waking hour doing things that say to God, “Thank you for being here with me right now. Thank you for this exact moment.”*

*~Sam*

At the ripe old age of twelve, Sam discovered the mythical place that countless others have only dreamed of and read about. On the eve of becoming a full-fledged teenager, Sam stumbled upon the elusive center the universe. While she had no scientific proof of this discovery, Sam was certain that the entire world revolved around this one location, that the brightest stars gravitated in its direction, and most importantly, that she was being inextricably drawn to live there. In 2000 CE, Sam found New York City.

All it took was one week, some cliché sightseeing, one Broadway show, and she was converted. She writes, “On that trip I began a love affair with the city that is now about fifteen years old and still going strong. As a pre-teen, I latched onto the idea of being surrounded by the best art in the world created by some of the most ambitious people out there... So when I was 23, I came to the city directly from [graduate school]

with my degree in hand, and set out to find a job.”<sup>1</sup> Three years and two jobs later, Sam has achieved her childhood dream of becoming a New Yorker.

While Sam’s story is unique, her “dream” is anything but. 8.4 million people call New York City home, 55 million people traveled to see its sights in 2014 alone, and the highest concentration of bright-eyed post-grads flock to it over any other city in the world.<sup>2</sup> Throwing all caution (and their entire savings accounts) to the wind, thousands of these “emerging” adults join the mass migration to the Big Apple as soon as their diplomas are in their hands.

But what is it about New York City that beckons to those who are just on the verge of starting their adult lives? Practically speaking, this overpopulated, dirty, and ridiculously expensive city is the last place a college graduate drowning in student loans should go. And yet, no other city offers so much possibility to its potential inhabitants: promises of fame and fortune, whiffs of power and success, hopes of finding true love, and dreams of making a difference in the world. A modern day Tower of Babel, New York City is where bold seekers go not only to make a name for themselves but to get closer to something greater than themselves.

Sam aspired for both. Like so many who immigrate to New York, Sam’s pursuit of greatness was tied up with dreams of being a writer. Yet she knew “making it” as an author was an elusive reality saved for the lucky and connected, rarely the talented and hungry. A card-carrying member of the latter category, Sam took a job as an administrative assistant at an architectural firm to pay the bills with the intention of writing in her free time. Before she knew it, weeks quickly turned to months and Sam

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<sup>1</sup> “Sam”, e-mail message to author, January 13, 2015.

<sup>2</sup> Jennifer Fermino, “Tourism is Booming,” <http://www.nydailynews.com/new-york/tourism-booming-set-bring-55m-visitors-2014-article-1.1544143>, (December 10, 2013).

realized she hadn't been writing much at all. Bored by her desk job, Sam went looking for another form of inspiration. Enter Eli. He was yin to her yang, Jewish to her Christian, uber-intellectual to her pop culture saavy, and ultimately uninterested to her deep infatuation. Even with all the hardship Sam had endured in the city, this heartbreak ended up being what unhinged her.

Three years, two jobs, one broken heart, and zero published works later, Sam began to doubt New York's ability to elevate her existence. Tired and unfulfilled by the rat race for a successful career and an eligible bachelor, she turned to an unexpected pillar from her past to offer clarity about her future: her Christian faith. While all of her friends were sleeping off their hangovers, Sam went in search for a church. Ironically this quest began in the center of the center of her universe: Fifth Avenue in Midtown Manhattan. This infamous street is home to some of the biggest financial institutions in the world; the most expensive shops, restaurants, and apartments; and the famed "tall steeple" churches of North America. But instead of gravitating towards the pristine marble of St. Patrick's Cathedral or the gothic limestone of St. Thomas Episcopal Church, Sam found herself drawn to the lone brownstone edifice standing quietly in a vast sea of sparkle: Fifth Avenue Presbyterian Church (FAPC).

### **Church And the City**

Founded in 1808, Fifth Avenue Presbyterian Church is a famed historical institution grounded in the Presbyterian tradition with her roots in Manhattan. Since her inception, FAPC has been one of those rare churches that has challenged the status quo while also existing within its confines. Unsatisfied with simply being a well-known

church, FAPC has used her influence as a “tall steeple” church to bring the good news of the gospel to the masses and serve those most in need. While her pulpit has been occupied by a long line of renowned preachers from the Rev. Dr. John Brodhead Romeyn in 1808 to the Rev. Dr. Scott Black Johnston in 2008, many of her most notable leaders have led from the pews. These members include founding member Betsey Jackson, an African-American slave; Joanna Bethune, “the mother of the American Sunday School”; and Lowell Mason, famed hymn composer.<sup>3</sup>

Most importantly, FAPC has remained wholly committed to living out its mission in the real world even when it was dangerous or costly. In November of 2001, the City of New York tested the limits of her commitment to inclusion and neighborly love when they prohibited any of the local homeless men and women to sleep on the church’s outdoor property.<sup>4</sup> Committed to being a witness to the homeless of the city in this way, FAPC responded to the city’s demands by filing a suit against the city under the protections of the First Amendment of the U.S. Constitution. After several appeals initiated by the City, in June of 2002, the Supreme Court deemed it the right of the church to allow homeless persons to sleep on her steps as argued by the church.<sup>5</sup>

FAPC’s commitment to both the Word proclaimed and enacted, head and heart, thinking and serving, is what sets her apart from the churches on the extreme ends of the religious spectrum that choose either / or. In a world full of extremes, this well-rounded approach has had the most unintended outcome: attracting young adults.

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<sup>3</sup> Kathy Henderson, ed., *A Proud Heritage: A Pictorial History of Fifth Avenue Presbyterian Church* (New York: Fifth Avenue Presbyterian Church 2008), 8-11.

<sup>4</sup> “Fifth Avenue Presbyterian Church vs. City of New York,” Caselaw, accessed November 30, 2013, <http://caselaw.findlaw.com/us-2nd-circuit/1372775.html>.

<sup>5</sup> Sidley Austin LLP. “Representative Experience.” Accessed November 30, 2013, [http://www.sidley.com/files/RepresentativeExperience/83e5a885-a528-44bd-8653-06cb7bad6e08/Presentation/ceRepExperienceDocument2/Fifth\\_Avenue\\_Presbyterian\\_Church\\_Brief\\_Received\\_7-16-07.pdf](http://www.sidley.com/files/RepresentativeExperience/83e5a885-a528-44bd-8653-06cb7bad6e08/Presentation/ceRepExperienceDocument2/Fifth_Avenue_Presbyterian_Church_Brief_Received_7-16-07.pdf).

## **Young Adults & the City**

Throughout the course of its 200-year history, FAPC has become a rare success story in a dying denomination. Because of her combined commitment to both preaching and practice, she has proved to be extremely effective in drawing in the most critical of New Yorkers as well as the city's ever-growing young adult population. This ability to attract and retain young adults is a huge accomplishment as FAPC has one of the most vibrant young adult populations within the Presbyterian Church (USA). But unlike the wider church, what is bringing this demographic in isn't a cool rock band or skinny-jeans-wearing-preacher. Young adults like Sam are hungry for a community of faith that speaks truth to and sheds light on the darkest areas of their lives. So while the preaching and outreach is what initially draws them in, it is their deeper need for a lasting faith that keeps them in.

Oddly enough, neither the church nor the young adults she ministers to are fully aware of the depth of this need, and the ignorance is understandable. After all, most of the young adults who are drawn to FAPC end up getting deeply involved in the life and leadership of the church. They consistently attend worship services on Sundays, engage in programs and fellowship throughout the week, and volunteer for service projects. On the surface, it seems as if these young adults are getting everything they could ever want or need from a church community. After all, they are introduced to and maintain this high level of involvement through their very own young adult ministry known as NEXT Ministries.

NEXT was Sam's shortcut back into the church. After attending one of its weekly discussions, she realized that FAPC was not only reminiscent of her past but also relevant to her present. Desperate for a genuine community, Sam quickly jumped into the fellowship events, community groups, service projects, and gatherings that NEXT had to offer. Yet over time, Sam realized that even though she was busy and preoccupied with all the activities of church and NEXT, her frustration with her career and her sadness over her break-up with Eli lingered. At best, her involvement in the church distracted her from her struggles, but only for a time. When Sunday turned into Monday and the buzz of the church died down, Sam was left with her nagging questions about her future, her purpose, and the meaning of her life.

For all its particularities, what was most notable about Sam's story was that it was so hauntingly familiar. It mirrored the stories of a majority of the young adults I had encountered during my time at FAPC, and I have heard a lot of them. I have been a part of the NEXT community for nearly a decade, first as her intern and now as her pastor. Over the years, I have watched hundreds of young adults, like Sam, cling to FAPC and NEXT like a life preserver in the storm that is New York. Actors, lawyers, bankers, and musicians; gay, straight, and bisexual; single, dating, married, and divorced; I have ministered to them all. I listened as they confessed their desire to get more out of life beyond a six-figure salary and worldly recognition. I sat with them as they mourned failed relationships, struggled with drugs and alcohol, and succumbed to depression and anxiety. Time after time, these NEXTers testified to how FAPC and NEXT were their source of comfort and hope, but what was noticeably absent was God's participation in their salvation.

But then like clockwork, the same young adults who went from just passively sitting in the pews to actively engaging as leaders of the congregation, would fall away after just a few years and leave. Some moved to other cities and were unable to find a church in their new hometowns that was “just like FAPC”. Some experienced a falling out within the community itself making it no longer safe or secure. And some went through hardships too severe for their faith to come out on the other side intact. If Sam’s story was reminiscent of the stories I had heard before, then she was just a few years from disappearing from the community altogether, and this time, I wasn’t going to wait for that to happen.

As a pastor who works closely with young adults, I have watched countless churches resort to any means necessary just to fill their pews with this elusive demographic. FAPC and NXT have been guilty of making the same desperate attempts at simply appeasing our young adults. We tried hosting happy hours instead of hard hitting discussions. We offered feel good answers instead of robust theology. Rather than identifying the real reason we can’t get or keep young adults, we, as the church, have desperately employed superficial solutions. But if we were to take the time to really understand this generation, we would see that the real issue isn’t that many of these young adults don’t believe in God anymore, but that the ones that *do* believe do not know how to engage or interpret their faith in their daily lives. It is this inability to understand and communicate one’s faith that has caused NEXTers like Sam to ultimately leave the church because they don’t know that their personal faith matters in the first place.

I know that my problems seem rich. After all, most churches are simply trying to get young adults into their front doors while I am trying to figure out how to keep them

from leaving out the back door. But the way I see it, the two problems are one and the same. Our strategy for getting this demographic to come to church should be the same reason they choose to stay. Not only is this generation far too savvy for cheap parlor tricks and empty promises, but the church is far too desperate for quick fixes and cut-rate theologies. Whether we want to face it or not, *this* is an issue that impacts the entire church because if we want a viable tradition to hand down to the next generation of believers, we need to figure out how to encourage a more sustainable tradition for this generation of believers. The question remains: How did we get here in the first place?

## CHAPTER 2

### AN UNSUSTAINABLE FAITH

*I believe that God wants me to be authentic.  
I believe that I have a lot to learn about how to fully trust in God.  
I believe that God wants me to be full of joy.  
I believe that God is proud of me.  
I believe that, although I am in pain as I write this confession, a glorious future awaits me.  
I believe that God loves me.*

*~Drew*

Rain or shine, I can count on Drew being in the pews. Blazer, bow tie, and slacks, his formality is not out of compulsion or propriety. Drew actually prefers a more traditional worship service with classical music and “a respect for the liturgical calendar”.<sup>6</sup> Having grown up in what he describes as “a middle of the road Evangelical church”, going to church has always been a key part of Drew’s individual and family life. His parents taught Sunday School while he participated in every social activity his junior high and senior high youth group had to offer. Unlike Sam, Drew continued to regularly attend services throughout college and has continued to do so with every move he has made, job he has changed, and journey he has embarked on.

Yet even though his attendance and commitment to the church have always been stellar, a strange yet unsurprising thing began to happen to Drew’s faith practice during his twenties. A corollary relationship developed between his experience of the world and

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<sup>6</sup> “Drew”, e-mail message to author, January 12, 2015.

his perception of God. The bigger the world became, the smaller his faith felt. He writes, “I attended contemporary Evangelical churches (just like most young professionals my age), but more and more, I was growing disillusioned with the certainty of belief of the pastors at these churches, the seemingly ‘make you feel guilty’ nature of these sermons, etc.”<sup>7</sup> The black and white answers of his youth no longer held up in his increasingly gray world. As he encountered people of other religions and those the church categorically condemned, Drew found himself resenting the notion that God not only cared about Christians but also that God only saved Christians. By the time he arrived at FAPC, Drew was well into the process of outgrowing the faith he had held for most of his life.

Even still, habit prevailed and Drew became involved in NEXT Ministries in 2013. After just a few months of participation, Drew became a full-fledged member of FAPC. He fell back into his familiar routine of active engagement and near-perfect attendance, but underneath the dedicated façade was a broken believer. Not only were his doubts about God deepening, but his belief in himself was also falling apart. Evangelically speaking, Drew considered himself “eternally saved and redeemed”, but on the day-to-day, he was barely surviving. Behind his perfectly curated appearance lay an insecure man battling several addictions. Unfortunately, like most addicts, Drew is most susceptible of faltering when he feels alone or inept, two emotions New York is notorious for inducing.

With every relapse, Drew instinctively looked to his faith for guidance, but all he could come up with were answers about obtaining salvation in the afterlife. The only problem was that he needed salvation in the here and now. Even with all the church

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<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

Drew had attended over the years, he still didn't have the necessary language or theological tools to help him through his real life struggles. He could easily recite the "Christian-ese" instilled in him as a youth, but none of these pretty platitudes met Drew in the depths of his depression. The God he had come to know was a god of angels, not of addicts. Slowly but surely, Drew lost his faith in the kind of God who didn't care for Muslims, homosexuals, or sinners like himself; but unfortunately, he didn't have a better God to believe in.

While Drew's story is unique, his rejection of his adolescent faith is not. NEXTer after NEXTer seemed to share Drew's disillusionment, questions, and doubt. With each conversation I had or discussion I led, I found myself doing more therapy than research. Some self-identified as recovering Evangelicals, others as lapsed Catholics, and the rest as Christians who just didn't know what they believed anymore, if they believed anything at all. On the surface, their struggle seemed to be with the institution: organized religion, the evangelical church, and even their own denomination. But the deeper we went, the more I realized their issue wasn't with the church but with the God being proclaimed at church. These well-meaning, God-fearing, church-going young adults simply didn't know how to insert their childhood God into their adult world. Trapped in this unclear, shaky middle ground, it is no surprise that these young adults were unable to engage and articulate their faith. They hardly understood it.

I'll be honest. I didn't see the source of the problem at first. In my early exploration of these cyclical departures, I assumed I was just dealing with a growing frustration with the church. Could you blame me? Whenever I asked these NEXTers to talk about their faith, good or bad, it always came back to the institution. Positively

speaking, they talked about their love for FAPC and her life changing ministries. On the flipside, however, they spoke of the irrelevance of the denomination, their discomfort over Christianity's reputation for being so judgmental, and their disgust with the hypocrisy of her leaders. Yet there they were... at church. So I began to probe deeper into what lay behind their anger and frustration and what I discovered was sadness and fear. Underneath every direct complaint about the church was an indirect confession about God. No matter how hard they tried, they couldn't reconcile the reality of what the church had become with their hope of who they believed God to be.

So I asked them. “What do *you* believe?” And for the first time, I was presented with silence. For all their commentary on the institution, they didn’t have much to say about the One behind its existence. Sure, they could recall parts of the Apostle’s Creed, regurgitate “Sunday School” answers, and recite John 3:16. But every single person I asked this question to couldn’t say for themselves who they believed God or Jesus to be. Some attributed their inability to respond to the fact that no one had ever asked them that question while some simply said they knew the answer but didn’t know how to put it into words. Whatever the reason, I couldn’t overlook the fact that the holiest of truths that undergirds the existence of the church and our faith as Christians was utterly inaccessible to a group of people who needed it the most.

The solution to most problems only comes when you finally ask the right question and I knew I had finally asked the right question. “What do you believe?” I knew that in order for these Millennials to have a faith that would last, it needed to be rooted and grounded in their own personal belief. But I also knew I couldn’t just hand them this faith. In order for it to be real, it had to be authentically their own. The kind of faith I

was hoping for would have to be found within the very hearts and minds of these Millennials and confessed from the very mouths of these Millennials.

While I figured out a huge part of how we got here in the first place, the discovery itself raised even more questions. For example, “How do I get a group of people to answer a question they can’t and don’t want to answer?” So before setting out to do the seemingly impossible, I endeavored to first get a better idea of who this group of people was and the real reason behind why they can’t and don’t want to confess their faith in the first place.

### **The Millennial Generation**

The most rudimentary profile of this generation will tell you that Millennials are those born between the years of 1982-2004.<sup>8</sup> Also known as Generation Y, Generation Me, Entitlement Generation, Net Generation, Echo Boomers and Generation Next, the Millennial generation is the largest generation ever to exist with a population of 80 million plus.<sup>9</sup> In addition to its great size, Millennials are also the most diverse in history.<sup>10</sup> As a founding member of this generation (a.k.a. one of its older members), I am able to provide an insider’s view to the demographic that is changing the world... for better and for worse. True to my generation’s appreciation for brevity, I can sum up everything you need to know about our generation in three simple words: **Google, Facebook, and Twitter.**

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<sup>8</sup> Neil Howe and William Strauss, *Generations: The History of America's Future, 1584 to 2069* (New York: William Morrow & Company, 1991), 102.

<sup>9</sup> U.S. Chamber of Commerce Foundation, *The Millennial Generation Research Review*, (Washington D.C.: National Chamber Foundation, 2012), 2.

<sup>10</sup> “10 Profiles of Millennials,” Asterix Group, accessed July 10, 2014, [http://asterixgroup.com/wp-content/uploads/2011/04/asterixGROUP\\_10-Profiles\\_of\\_Millennials.pdf](http://asterixgroup.com/wp-content/uploads/2011/04/asterixGROUP_10-Profiles_of_Millennials.pdf).

## Google

Most Millennials can't remember what their life was like before the advent of the Internet. To be fair, most Millennials were born after AOL, Yahoo, and Google became household names. In the way the printing press changed the course of history by making *some* information a *little* more accessible, the Internet has changed the course of humanity by making *all* information *completely* accessible. Unlike any preceding generation, Millennials came of age expecting and even demanding immediate access to information, commerce, and connectivity. The world is quite literally at our fingertips and the company responsible for making that happen is the multi-multi-multi-billion dollar technology company known as Google.

Much more commonly employed as a verb in our vocabulary than a noun, Millennials engage in the act of “Googling” on a non-stop basis. Questions only remain unanswered for as long as it takes us to type out the question and needs only remain unmet for as long as it takes for us to pull out our smart phones. Older generations just think that our “pulse runs fast” but our need for a constant flow of information coupled with frequently changing images is nurture, not nature.<sup>11</sup>

In the positive sense, our penchant for “Googling” has made us broadly informed and exceptionally educated. Our unfettered access to global knowledge has helped cultivate our unique understanding of the world. We see ourselves as citizens of the world rather than citizens of a particular country or nation.<sup>12</sup> This sophisticated understanding of ourselves grounds our understanding for “the Other”. After all, if the

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<sup>11</sup> Ibid.

<sup>12</sup> Akela Lacy, “The ‘First Globals: Millennials and Foreign Policy,’” <http://www.diplomaticourier.com/news/topics/diplomacy/1848-the-first-globals-millennials-and-foreign-policy>, (October 17, 2013).

world is our backyard, then everyone is our neighbor. And it is our love of neighbor that grounds our generation's trademark passion for social justice.

Unlike our parents, we are not limited to the biases of our favorite news channel or conversation partners. Google has exposed us to the vast diversity of opinions and perspectives that is out there. This widespread exposure to other cultures, traditions, religions, and viewpoints, has made us much more accepting of those who are different than us. What's more is that by offering free and uniform access to the contents of the Internet to everyone from rich to poor, black to white, old to young, companies like Google have played their part in helping to level the proverbial playing field and challenge the pre-existing hierarchies of power.<sup>13</sup>

Yet, on the downside, our equal-opportunity-access to all that Google has to offer has made us overwhelmed and confused. With all the choices laid out before us, we never learned the skill of being able to choose what's right for ourselves.<sup>14</sup> Sure we are exposed to the variety of opinions and perspectives on any subject matter, but now we don't know what *we* really think and what *our* true perspective is. But instead of stopping the flow of outside influence and asking the hard questions of ourselves, we fill the ensuing void with more consumption. We consume more information that makes us feel intelligent and powerful.<sup>15</sup> We consume alcohol and other substances that numb our

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<sup>13</sup> Spider Graham, "How the Internet Leveled the Playing Field and Gave Everyone a Voice, <http://www.bizjournals.com/bizjournals/how-to/growth-strategies/2015/04/how-the-internet-leveled-the-playing-field.html?page=all>, (April 9, 2015).

<sup>14</sup> Michael J. Anthony, ed, *Introducing Christian Education*, 243.

<sup>15</sup> Christian Smith, *Lost in Translation: The Dark Side of Emerging Adulthood* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011), 70.

creeping feelings of inadequacy and failure.<sup>16</sup> We consume sexual encounters that cover over the fact that we rarely experience intimacy.<sup>17</sup>

We should ask for help, but now we don't know where to turn. Google has filled those needs previously met by teachers, parents, pastors or other traditional authority figures. When we don't know something, we turn to Google. When we need something, we Google. When we want something, we turn to Google. Which is why we don't just question authority – we are known to disregard it entirely.<sup>18</sup> But when we encounter problems that Google can't help us with (which happens a lot), we don't always know what to do. In the end, our ability to Google has helped us become hyper attentive to the world and the people around us but ignorant of our own needs and issues.

## **Facebook**

Younger than Google, the social networking site, Facebook, has been a crucial part of the Millennial generation's social DNA for just a little over a decade. In the short time Facebook has been around, it has revolutionized the way the whole world does relationships. Yet the fact that it was invented by a Millennial for Millennials cannot be overlooked. Our generation has been uniquely impacted by this website in that it has come to define the way we see each other and ourselves. The impact can be most clearly seen by looking back at what life was like before Facebook.

My oldest sister, Christine, is a member of Generation X. She graduated from high school just seven years before I did and our experiences of that time are almost

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<sup>16</sup> Christian Smith, *Lost in Translation*, 110.

<sup>17</sup> Christian Smith, *Lost in Translation*, 148.

<sup>18</sup> Jean Twenge, *Generation Me: Why Today's Young Americans Are More Confident, Assertive, Entitled--and More Miserable Than Ever Before* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2006), 28.

identical... to a point. After graduation, Christine's contact with her most of her friends from high school was limited to flipping through her yearbook or reading old handwritten notes that had been passed in class. If she wanted to reconnect with a classmate she'd lost contact with over the years, she would have to pull out her old school directory or wait until the next class reunion came around. But those she did keep in touch throughout the years were the types of friends who went through life *with* her. Through marriage and divorce, birth and death, Christine's friends were small in quantity but strong in quality.

My experience has been quite different. As a Millennial, I graduated almost a decade and a half ago. Even though I moved clear across the country and rarely visit home, I still "keep in touch" with hundreds of old classmates on a very consistent basis. Thanks to Facebook, we are just a click away from each other at all times. I don't have to worry about losing touch with anyone from my past because I know where everyone is from their current hometown to their moment-by-moment location. I have gotten to know some of my old classmates better over Facebook than I did when we were actually going to school together. Through online social networking, my generation is known to be extremely relational and community-based, but this characterization is only half of the picture.

The positive half of the picture shows that Millennials love to make new friends. Through Facebook, we aren't just reconnecting with people we know from high school but meeting new people we never would have crossed paths with otherwise. Just like Google, Facebook has opened us to social possibilities not available to previous generations. If Facebook is the online version of the school cafeteria, nerds are "friends"

with jocks, cheerleaders “like” the chess club’s page, and your date to the prom just happens to live three time zones away. We aren’t pigeonholed by the cliché stereotypes found in *The Breakfast Club* because Facebook is all about the individual narrative, also known as the personal profile.

But if we look to the dark side of this picture, you’ll find that Facebook isn’t all it’s cracked up to be. I might be “friends” with hundreds of former classmates, but I haven’t exactly seen or spoken with any of them since we graduated. Yes, I know all about their recent nuptials, newborn babies, and even what they ate for dinner, but I don’t know how they are actually doing. And to be honest, they don’t really know how I am doing either. For example, they know that I had a baby last summer, but they have no idea how traumatic the experience was. They know I got a new job in 2011, but they have no idea how hard it was to get that job. Unlike Christine and her friends, my “friends” and I go through life in front of each other rather than with each other. We may have hundreds and even thousands of friends on Facebook, but that doesn’t mean they are real.

Unfortunately, despite our hope that more fake friends on Facebook will equal less loneliness in life, this social habit of ours is only leaving us more depressed and insecure. Studies show that the more time someone spends on Facebook, the less satisfied they are with their own lives.<sup>19</sup> We might be putting forward our best selves, but so is everyone else. If Facebook is the modern day version of “keeping up with the Jones”, then Millennials are keeping up on a non-stop basis and perpetually falling

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<sup>19</sup> “Get A Life!”, <http://www.economist.com/news/science-and-technology/21583593-using-social-network-seems-make-people-more-miserable-get-life>, (August 17, 2013).

short.<sup>20</sup> Our desire to be doing as well, if not better, than all of our friends has made us incapable of being honest or vulnerable about what we are really going through. Instead of facing our inadequacies, doubts, anxieties, and fears head on, we just snap another perfectly posed selfie and post it on Facebook with the misleading caption: *#nofilter*. In the end, Facebook has given Millennials a great way to make and maintain friendships, if fake and superficial friendships are the kind of you enjoy.

## Twitter

There is an unsubstantiated tale in the literary world that Ernest Hemingway bet his friends \$10 that he could craft a story out of six words. After his dinner partners threw their cash in the center of the table, Hemingway allegedly wrote the following words on a napkin: *For sale: baby shoes, never worn.*<sup>21</sup> True or not, this urban legend proves one's ability to say a lot with a little, the very premise that Twitter was founded upon. Another online social networking service, Twitter offers the masses a global platform... as long as your message doesn't exceed 140 characters. "Tweeting" (another a new verb to add to the cultural dictionary) takes the viral conversation of Facebook and takes it to the next level. By limiting the length and content of the message, Twitter is a rapidly updating online conversation that fans the flames of viral subject matters known as "hashtags".

Twitter has shaped and been shaped by the Millennial generation because it is the perfect outlet for a Google-educated and Facebook-connected demographic to not only

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<sup>20</sup> Maria Konnikova, "How Facebook Makes Us Unhappy,"  
<http://www.newyorker.com/tech/elements/how-facebook-makes-us-unhappy>, (September 10, 2013).

<sup>21</sup> "The (Urban) Legend of Ernest Hemingway's Six-Word Story",  
<http://www.openculture.com/2015/03/the-urban-legend-of-ernest-hemingways-six-word-story.html> (March 24, 2015).

push out their beliefs, ideas, and opinions, but also find better ones.<sup>22</sup> After all, what's the point of being super informed and having tons of friends if you can't share your fascinating opinions with those beloved confidantes? If we use the church as a metaphor then think of Google as the seminary, Facebook as the congregation, Twitter as the pulpit, which ultimately makes these Millennials the preachers of their self-made churches. And we have Twitter to thank for showing this generation just how powerful and important their personal testimony is to cultural discourse.<sup>23</sup>

Take example the 2014 shooting and subsequent death of Michael Brown. Only mere hours after Brown, an unarmed African American teenager, was gunned down by a police officer in the small city of Ferguson, Missouri, the story became a national headline after the Twitter hashtag, #Ferguson, went viral.<sup>24</sup> DeRay McKesson, one of the leading Twitter chroniclers of these events noted, "What's interesting about Twitter is that it's allowed us to tell the story as it happened and to own the medium and the message."<sup>25</sup> Just like Google and Facebook, Twitter is doing its part in changing the world Millennials are living into. This generation not only knows that their opinions matter, but they also know how to get it out to the largest possible audience.

But if Twitter is a pulpit, then the only sermons that get heard are the ones that go viral. And what makes something go viral? Researchers from Cornell University asked this very question and concluded that everything from blatantly asking your followers to

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<sup>22</sup> Peggy Drexler, "Millennials: Trust No One But Twitter," <http://ideas.time.com/2014/02/16/millennials-trust-no-one-but-twitter/>, (February 16, 2014)

<sup>23</sup> Ibid.

<sup>24</sup> Jenee Desmond-Harrison, "Twitter Forced the World to Pay Attention to Ferguson. It Won't Last." <http://www.vox.com/2015/1/14/7539649/ferguson-protests-twitter>, (January 15, 2015).

<sup>25</sup> Ibid.

re-Tweet your message to name-dropping will get your message out there.<sup>26</sup> But when it comes to actual content, opinions that are contrary go the distance. In response to this reality, Millennials are making their message less about what they believe is important or even true, and more about what they know will be retweeted. Yes, these young adults have a platform to speak out in ways previous generations only dreamed of, but these mediums have become less about self-edification and more about self-promotion. For as courageous and audacious as my generation can be, most of the times, we are just a ball of insecurity looking for validation. In the end, Twitter has given us a soapbox and we can either say what matters to us and perhaps be heard, or we can say what matters to the crowd and build ourselves an audience. Which of these options do you think a Millennial will choose?

### **No Faith = No Confession**

Based on the Millennial profile I just provided, it makes sense that my generation has the highest percentage of individuals in history who identify as religiously unaffiliated.<sup>27</sup> We don't need religious leaders to tell us what to believe or how to interpret the Bible because we have Google. We don't need the faith community to make friends or meet our significant other because we have Facebook. And we don't need the institution to lift up and validate our opinions and beliefs because we have Twitter. Yes, we came of age *after* the height of mainline Protestantism, and yes, we grew up seeing the Church as overly political, greedy, and power hungry, but I believe the main reason

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<sup>26</sup> Michael Casey, "Want Your Tweets to Go Viral? This Website Can Help," <http://www.cbsnews.com/news/want-your-tweets-to-go-viral-this-website-can-help/>, (February 16, 2015).

<sup>27</sup> The Pew Forum on Religion & Life, "Nones" on the Rise: One-in-Five Adults Have No Religious Affiliation (Washington D.C.: Pew Research Center, 2012), 33.

Millennial Christians are leaving the church is more profound than that. It's not just that the church is giving us so many reasons to leave, it's that the church isn't giving us a good enough reason to stay.

Allow me to explain. As far as my generation is concerned, the church is responding to its rapidly declining status in two extreme ways. On the one extreme, the church is clinging to the Choose-Or-Die approach that gained traction during the Great Awakening.<sup>28</sup> By using heaven and hell as bait, this approach forces Millennials to either choose the doctrine and dogma of a more conservative Christianity or well, die. The clear message Drew heard in church as a youth was, "Believe the right thing and you will be saved. Reject God's truth and you will spend an eternity in hell." Because God laid down these laws in Scripture, there is no room for dissent or discussion.

The problem is that Millennials either don't believe this hard line version of the Gospel or they don't want to. Since we see ourselves as citizens of humanity, then we believe we are all in this together. Therefore the kind of God that condemns our gay, Muslim, or Atheist friends to hell is not the kind of God we can or ever will confess. Since we are unable and unwilling to confess this version of Christianity, we'd rather just walk away from the church entirely then figure things out for ourselves. But just because we've given up on the church, doesn't mean we've given up on God. A majority of us, at 64%, still believe that God exists.<sup>29</sup> We are banking on the fact that our God is nicer than the One getting all the airtime on the news, because if God's not, then we're dead anyways.

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<sup>28</sup> Robert D. Putnam and David E. Campbell, *American Grace: How Religion Divides Us and Unites Us* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2010), 83.

<sup>29</sup> The Pew Forum on Religion & Life, "Nones" on the Rise: One-in-Five Adults Have No Religious Affiliation (Washington D.C.: Pew Research Center, 2012), 33.

On the other extreme, the more liberal church is catering to all the complaints and criticisms of my generation by offering a Whatever-You-Want approach where every single person gets to choose his or her own spiritual adventure. The mainline church has been so desperate to get and keep the young adults burned by their more conservative counterpart that they are taking a radical come-as-you-are stance on dogma and belief. While this approach makes room for the myriad of doubts and fears my generation has about God and the church, it isn't creating space for us to actually deal with these doubts and fears. It doesn't take long for us to realize that the reason we don't *disagree* with what's being said in this more liberal extreme of the church is because nothing is really being said in the first place.

We appreciate the church's attentiveness to our criticisms and concerns, but not at the cost of proclaiming the Gospel. As odd as it sounds, Millennials want nothing more than for the church to be the church. As my generational profile showed, we need clarity and truth just as much, if not more, than any other previous generation. So while this version of church isn't sending any of our friends to an eternity in hell, it is also isn't telling us where we can find salvation.

### **The Path Forward**

In May of 2013, columnist, Joel Stein wrote an article for TIME Magazine entitled "*The ME ME ME Generation: Millennials are lazy, entitled narcissists who still live with their parents... Why they'll save us all.*" Accurate to the title, most of the article is spent discussing my generation's most horrible traits from our laziness straight on through to our narcissism. If Stein had only talked about the bad stuff, his article would

have read like every other piece of literature I have ever read about Millennials, but his conclusion swings in a surprising direction when he ponders how we might be the ones who will actually save the world. Chief among the reasons why is that we challenge convention.<sup>30</sup> Whatever the status quo is, Millennials challenge it. We look at the state of affairs and ask if there is a better way, smarter way, a more meaningful way. The church is no exception.

Yes, Millennials are leaving the church, but in doing so, they are challenging the very convention of the institution. They are forcing their church leaders, like me, to look at the state of affairs and ask if there is a better way, a smarter way, a more meaningful way. They are demanding a functional theology that lies somewhere between Choose-or-Die and Whatever-You-Want. They are showing the church that the reason *they* aren't talking about the things that matter is because the *church* isn't talking about the things that matter. Ironically enough, it is in their very rejection of the church that they might actually help save it.

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<sup>30</sup> Joel Stein, “*The ME ME ME Generation: Millennials are lazy, entitled narcissists who still live with their parents... Why they'll save us all,*” TIME Magazine, May 20, 2013, accessed April 1, 2015, <http://time.com/247/millennials-the-me-me-me-generation/>.

## CHAPTER 3

### FINDING OUR LEGO

*In my short lifetime, I have done a lot of wandering, seeking faith and goodness. And despite being directionless (feeling ashamed of my failures and realizing the ever-increasing wrong I can do as a human being), I have always felt the magnetic pull of an unwavering inner compass that points to Him. I think that God's love and grace are both unfathomable and inescapable. This gives me hope, which leads me to believe that hope, in its true nature, is a form of love for God.*

~Anna

Anna never planned on living in New York. Anna never planned on coming to church. And Anna never planned on getting involved in a group like NEXT. She writes, “With the exception of FAPC, I have always kept a safe distance from the church.” She is not like most of the NEXTers who participated in this project. She doesn’t see Sunday worship as a critical part of her weekend routine. She doesn’t recite the Lord’s Prayer before she goes to sleep. But this doesn’t mean she isn’t a person of faith. Her beliefs run deeper than her religious practices.

Anna happened to find FAPC and NEXT long enough to participate in this project and has since stepped away from the church again. “As a young person I came to the church hoping not only to further define my faith but also to further define myself. I wanted to be able to define myself by my faith, because I really do see it as my

foundation, but I wasn't able to reconcile myself with the church. I don't think it's a failure. I just don't belong. Ultimately that has led me to step back."

Anna is a perfect example of the Millennial described in the previous chapter. While she self-identifies as a Christian, it doesn't mean she identifies with the church. After years of trying to fit her ideas and beliefs into the mold set forward by the various churches she attended, Anna found that the God she worshipped was much bigger than the one she found trapped in fancy sanctuaries and ancient rituals. This disconnect caused Anna to ultimately leave the church because it wasn't doing anything to move her faith forward. If anything, it was keeping her faith back. Now, Anna will tell you that she practices her faith on her own at home, in nature, on the subway, and with loved ones.

Anna's choice to observe her faith outside of the institution is not unique. In fact, it is the combination of this generation's unique profile and the church's recent struggles that has given birth to a large, growing movement of those who identify as "spiritual but not religious" (SBNR). SBNR devotees, like Anna, believe in God but find the tradition to be a poor representation of the divine so they have taken matters into their own hands. As mentioned in the previous chapter, I believe this is because Millennials are finding the church either too rigid for their ever-expanding world views or too lax for the ever-confusing life experiences. It is their hunger for something in the middle that is pushing them to chart their own path as spiritual but not religious.

While I have some basic concerns regarding the SBNR movement, not the least of which is the inherent human need for community, I am more interested in what it can teach us. In choosing to take their faith into their own hands, these SBNR Millennials are

blatantly communicating their desire for a different kind of faith than the church is peddling: one that is without all the pomp and circumstance and more about the content and the character. They are telling us that the solution isn't to add more programs, pursue more innovation, or even to engage in more evangelism. If anything, the SBNR movement is preaching the opposite message. By eschewing tradition for practice, Millennials are challenging the church to go back to the basics of what it means to be Christian in the first place.

### **What Is Our Interlocking Modular Unit?**

The “back-to-the-basics” strategy isn’t cutting edge or new. These rapidly changing times have challenged organizations and companies around the globe to reimagine their identity. Brick-and-mortar giants like Best Buy have had to re-figure out their place in an online heavy marketplace in order to survive let alone thrive. Companies like Blockbuster have failed to adapt. Yet no other company has re-contemplated their purpose to such success as the infamous toy manufacturer, the Lego Company.

A household name, Lego blocks have been on the hearts, minds, and floors of children and adults alike for over six decades and continue to experience double digit sales growth annually, but their story hasn’t always been such a happy one.<sup>31</sup> In 2003, after aggressively expanding into peripheral markets like video games, clothing, theme parks, and books, Lego was on the verge of bankruptcy. Having been led almost

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<sup>31</sup> Roar Rude Trangbæk, “Global Growth Ensures Strong 2014 Result For the Lego Group”, <http://www.lego.com/en-us/aboutus/news-room/2015/february/lego-group-2014-annual-results>, (February 25, 2015).

exclusively by members of the founding family, the company sought to correct course by hiring an outsider by the name of Jørgen Vig Knudstorp.

As CEO, Knudstorp's first strategic move was controversial to say the least. Instead of seeking growth, Knudstorp set out to achieve one simple goal: to reevaluate the company's core mission. He noted that, “[Lego] had lost its way in terms of understanding its own self-identity.” Because of this apparent identity crisis, he challenged the company to consider the answer to a very simple question: “What is Lego uniquely about?”<sup>32</sup> As it turns out, the answer was right in front of them. After years of downsizing, rightsizing, and intense market research, Knudstorp and his team concluded that Lego was uniquely about interlocking modular units. In other words, Lego was uniquely about... Legos.

This realization may not seem particularly groundbreaking, but it ended up being a game changer for the company as they went from being nearly insolvent to being the biggest toy manufacturer in the planet valued at \$14.6 billion in just under ten years.<sup>33</sup> After refocusing its mission and purpose, Knudstorp was able to take this flailing company to new heights simply by meeting his consumers' distinct desire for the unique Lego product. It doesn't take an MBA to realize that that this positive change happened after Lego remembered and reprioritized what they were in business for in the first place.

While the church has been wary and even critical of the SBNR movement, I would argue that their very existence is proof that Millennials still believe in, need, and want God in their lives. Unfortunately, they don't see the church as effective in

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<sup>32</sup> Bloomberg, “Brick by Brick: Inside Lego”, <http://www.bloomberg.com/news/videos/b/4a56e664-4427-49fc-82fb-2d5e4a6f4502>, (April 14, 2014).

<sup>33</sup> Tom Metcalf and Robert LaFranco, “Lego Builds New Billionaires as Toymaker Tops Mattel”, <http://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2013-03-13/lego-builds-new-billionaires-as-toymaker-topples-mattel>, (March 13, 2013).

facilitating that sacred connection anymore. In the same way Lego became too focused on things outside of their core business, Millennials think that the church has become too focused on things like politics, money, and rules, and thus have lost sight of what really matters. But the good news is that we don't have to wrack our brains trying to figure out what matters to this generation. By choosing spirituality over religion, God over the institution, practice over tradition, these Millennials are blatantly telling us what the church's interlocking modular unit is and should be: Jesus Christ. How exactly are they doing this? By going back to the basics of Christian life and practice: social justice, genuine community, and sacred tradition.

### **Encountering Jesus**

I know it is not groundbreaking to say that the church should be about Jesus. After all, our hymns bear his name, our sermons tell of his earthly ministry, and our buildings have his cross lifted high for all to see. Every Christian knows that Jesus is at the crux of our faith tradition. Then where is the problem? How is this generation simultaneously hungry for a Savior but unable to call upon his name? The answer is quite simple: these young adults are not being challenged to encounter Jesus Christ for themselves. We have not trusted these Millennials or God enough to let them meet Jesus in their own lives, find him within their own contexts, and proclaim him with their own voice. If anything, we have stood in their way.

How have we done this? First, we have stopped engaging in the important practice of connecting what we practice to what we believe. While we have effectively preached powerful messages of justice and equality to this socially aware generation, we

haven't been explicit enough as to *why* we, as the church, are about and should be about those things. We have touted the values of liberation theology but have failed to delve into the theology part of it. Secondly, we have tried to make the Christian faith so palatable that we have gone ahead and done all the hard work for these individuals by pre-packaging Jesus for them. The most damaging result of babying this generation is that these young adults don't know how to find Jesus for themselves.

To be fair, the mainline church had her reasons for going light on the whole Jesus thing. It's almost as if the sum of the church's divisions over the past few decades resulted in a messy divorce between the evangelical church and the mainline church, where the evangelicals got to keep Jesus in the settlement. How did this happen? By loudly and frequently mentioning Jesus' name in association with their brand of Christianity, Evangelicals effectively branded the Jesus of individual salvation and personal morality as the Jesus of the Church. Wanting to define themselves over and against this version of Christianity, the mainline church continued to focus on Jesus' ministry to the poor, oppressed, and forgotten, but stopped talking about the reason, or rather the person, behind their good deeds.

Luckily, the solution is just as simple as the problem. If Jesus is the Lego of the church and the goal is to connect these Millennials to Jesus, then the church simply needs to start talking about him again, referencing him again, and being explicitly about him again. And the best place to start just happens to be the one unique and authoritative place we can encounter the life, ministry, and death of Jesus Christ, and that place is Scripture. This might seem like the last place a Googling, Facebooking, Tweeting Millennial would want to go to find Jesus, but it is precisely because this generation is so

overwhelmed and inundated by modern storytelling that this ancient narrative is the best place to start. After all, the true desire and hope of the Millennial generation is to be better, more loving, more inclusive than any other generation, but they want to get there in a way that is genuine and authentic. Scripture provides that genuine example and authentic challenge through the life and ministry of Jesus Christ.

What's more is that even though SBNR Millennials, like Anna, say they encounter God in people, places and things, such things are hardly distinctly Christian or Reformed encounters with God. If anything, they are precisely the opposite. These "spiritual" approaches become more about where the individual is willing to meet God, not where God has already met the individual. Furthermore, this approach plays into the destructive assumption held by many Millennials that relationships should be on our terms and on our time. Yet our Christian and Reformed theology expressly teaches us that we don't encounter God but God encountered and encounters us through the person of Christ in Scripture.

As for the church's role in this, we need to stop being simply scholars and start being witnesses. Instead of spoon-feeding already formulated theologies and interpretations, the church needs to challenge and equip these young adults to find Jesus of Nazareth for themselves. We can faithfully journey with these young members of our faith communities without dictating their destination. This means creating space to ask the hard questions, but also providing the tools to worth through those questions. This means making room for the inevitable doubts and fears that come with a life of faith, but also allowing Scripture to speak directly to those doubts and fears. This means proclaiming the Gospel in our communities, but letting the Holy Spirit do the

transformational work. This means actually opening up and reading our Bibles.

### **Finding A Millennial Hermeneutic**

If the goal is getting back to the basics and the basics is Jesus, and Jesus is in Scripture, then perhaps we should just download a Bible app onto every Millennial's iPhone and call it a day. But there is one fatal flaw with that plan. The key to having this generation encounter Jesus in Scripture isn't just about getting them to read the Bible but giving them a working lens or hermeneutic with which to do so. While there are plenty of effective hermeneutical models available to young adults, I would like to propose a new method that plays off of the way Millennials already interpret the world around them: a hermeneutic of self.

If you were to ask any young adult how they read through and interpret their Facebook or Instagram feed, the first response you might get is one of confusion. But with further pushing and prodding, it wouldn't take long for you to discover that a Millennial hermeneutic involves interpreting the world over and against themselves. "How are my friends doing better/worse than me?" "How do I stack up against my peers?" In essence, by looking at and interpreting the lives of others on social media, these Millennials are trying to figure out how *they* are doing, where *they* fit in the world, and who *they* truly are. However, the implementation of this hermeneutic begins to really fall apart when we consider the fact that people are rarely vulnerable and honest on social media. Which means that today's Millennials are comparing themselves to completely idealized and even fictitious versions of their peers leaving them feeling anxious, insecure, and hopeless about their own lives.

But what if they took that hermeneutic of self and applied it to Scripture instead of social media? Instead of reading the Bible for simple black and white answers, what would it be like if Millennials read it in the same matter as they Facebook: as a way to understand themselves and their place in the world? Would it enhance their natural propensity towards social justice or make them more inward focused? Would it make them less anxious or more worried about their eternal fate? Would seeing themselves in light of Jesus of Nazareth ultimately save their souls or condemn them?

### **Reading Jesus**

As Christians, if we truly believe in this Jesus guy and all that Scripture says about him, then we also believe that something happens to us when we meet him. But what is that “something”? What would happen if a Millennial employed their often used hermeneutic of self and shifted it to their reading of Scripture? Before testing out that question within the NEXT community at FAPC, I found that a precedent already existed within the hallowed pages of the New Testament. As I said, Millennials may be unique but not as much as they’d like to think they are. Their odd mixture of self-doubt and over eagerness can also be found a few thousand years back in the very rock of the church they struggle so much with: the apostle Peter. It is through the example of Peter that we see a genuine encounter with Jesus not only produces a new understanding of one’s self but a new understanding of Jesus.

When Jesus first encounters Peter, a.k.a. Simon, in Luke 5, he is but a simple fisherman just trying to make ends meet. After asking to Peter to step out in faith and let down his nets, Peter responds with skepticism but does what Jesus asks. As a result,

Peter's nets were so full of fish that they began to break under the weight of the catch. Upon encountering Jesus' unexpected and underserved generosity, something happens to Peter and he confesses and exclaims, "Go away from me, Lord, for I am a sinful man (Luke 5:8)!" This initial encounter with Jesus immediately causes Peter to understand and see himself in a new and revolutionary way.

Then in Matthew 14, when the disciples see Jesus walking on water, Peter also steps out on the water to walk toward Jesus. Yet, after seeing the wind and growing afraid, Peter begins to drown causing him to cry out to Jesus to be saved. It is after following Jesus, being saved by Jesus, and witnessing his miracles in his own life that Peter makes the ultimate realization. In a conversation with his disciples in the gospel of Matthew, Jesus asks them who the people are alleging that he is. To which they respond, "Some say John the Baptist, but others Elijah, and still others Jeremiah or one of the prophets (Matthew 16:14)." But when Jesus amends the question and asks, "But who do you say that I am?" Peter blurts out, "You are the Messiah, the Son of the Living God (Matthew 16:16)." Simple and to the point, Peter's confession of faith earns him the keys to the kingdom and a promise that the church will be built upon him as the rock.

If Peter's example can be applied to the Millennial experience, what do we think will happen if Millennials start reading Scripture in a way that directly impacts and informs their lives? What do we think will happen if Millennials replace the need to see themselves through the lens of the world with the desire to see themselves through the lens of Jesus Christ? What do we think an encounter with the Messiah, the Son of Living God will do to today's young adults? I think they will do as Peter did and start confessing. Confessing revelatory things about themselves and confessing revolutionary

things about Jesus. The real question is whether or not the church will be wise enough to receive those beautiful confessions as they come pouring in.

## CHAPTER 4 THE CONFESSONAL

*God's strength is shown in His acceptance of my human doubt. He is so big that he doesn't require my unwavering belief for Him to continue to be. He just is, whether or not I'm along for the ride. God's mercy is shown to me in His sending of his own son, Jesus Christ, for crucifixion, in order that I may always have His blessed gift of forgiveness and redemption. It is pretty incredible when I think about it. I don't talk to God as much as I feel I should, but I know the depth of my own belief, despite myself, when I'm having trouble starting a prayer and know in my bones I can be silent and allow myself to be in God's presence, and He'll know me.*

-Abby

While on her way to work one day, Abby had an interesting encounter on the subway. The experience was so unsettling, so unnerving, and so provocative that this young adult did the only thing she really could do the minute she arrived to her office. She shared it with the entire world on Facebook. At 9:52 am on January 16, 2014, she published the following post:

*On the subway this morning, a self-style "preacher" was forcing on everyone his own take on evangelism, in the form of a didn't-end-at-the-next-stop sermon about Jesus coming to save us all from our sins.*

*Even as a Christian who actually believes this, I was ticked. Shoving your beliefs down the throats of commuters just doesn't seem very Godly. Then when he launched into the sins of fornication and homosexuality, while prominently holding his Bible, I was just boiling. Here is this guy, representing himself as a Christian, clutching our shared Holy Book and loudly asserting things I don't believe to people who - by the numbers - already question and sometimes distrust my religion. What's a Christian to do in this situation? What would you do?*<sup>34</sup>

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<sup>34</sup> Abby's Facebook page, accessed January 20, 2014.

Abby is not one to shy away from a conflict. Extremely self-assured, successful, and well spoken, she is the first to defend someone who has been wronged, correct someone who is behaving unfairly, and point out the injustices she sees in the world. But Abby is not alone in her crusade because if the world is a pulpit then everyone is a preacher. A truth that Abby herself experienced that particular morning on her way to work. Yet even in a situation as maddening as that one, she did the unexpected. She did nothing. As we have already seen, as talkative and opinionated as Millennials are, when it comes to their beliefs, they are surprisingly silent.

What makes matters worse is that the version of Christianity that is getting the most airtime on the news (and on subway platforms) is the one that Millennials adamantly reject as it often features a message of exclusion and judgment. What is even more unfortunate is that while these young adults are certain they don't want to be that kind of Christian, they aren't quite sure what kind of Christian they do want to be. As mentioned in previous chapters, behind this hesitancy and indecision are two harmful assumptions. The first is that these young adults think their confession must adhere to a certain set of beliefs in order to be considered valid and "Christian", even though this closed set of beliefs does not hold all they believe to be true. And the second is the assumption that their confessions of faith don't really matter to the church in the first place.

A few years ago I casually asked Abby for her confession of faith using the same question posed to the disciples in the Gospel of Matthew, "Who do you say that Jesus is?" After pausing for a while, Abby's response was short and to the point. She said, "I honestly can't tell you anything about my faith beyond the Apostles Creed." If Abby is

representative of her generation, then it's safe to assume that the confessions and creeds of our tradition are still relevant to Millennials, but in what ways? On the one hand, we can conclude that they are effective in guiding (if not dictating) the faith of modern believers. On the other hand, we can't tell if they are producing authentic confessions of faith or just regurgitated ones.

In further conversations with Abby, I uncovered what was underneath her unrivaled devotion to the Apostle's Creed. Not only had she never been asked what she believed throughout her lifetime in the church, she had also been told that all she ever needed to know or believe was written within the sacred creeds of her tradition. Which means it's not just that she didn't really know what she believed, it's that she didn't know she had a say in the matter. By calling herself Christian or Presbyterian, she just assumed she was expected to stick to the party line whenever asked. This ended up being fine right up until the point she hit a rough patch in her life and her static set of beliefs offered her no real comfort or hope. The sacred words of the Apostle's Creed were incapable of stepping off the page and entering into her life. As a result, she grew disillusioned not only with her faith tradition but also with the God it preached.

This is where I see the unsustainability of the modern Millennial faith really come into play. Just like Abby, countless NEXTers know how to answer the standard questions of the church, but when asked questions about their personal faith, their own beliefs, and their unique understanding of God, they are stumped. The tragedy is that they desperately need to have a faith they can call their own in order to survive life's many challenges and struggles especially as Millennials. But if we have learned anything about this opinionated and vocal generation, it's that they have to internalize and confess

the Gospel truth for themselves. The hardest part is getting them to believe their confessions actually matter in the first place.

### ***Semper Reformanda***

The 19<sup>th</sup> century Reformed theologian and pioneer in the field of symbolics, Dr. Philip Schaff, wrote, “Faith, like all strong conviction, has a desire to utter itself before others – ‘Out of the abundance of the heart the mouth speaketh;’ ‘I believe, therefore I confess.’”<sup>35</sup> In other words, confessions are organic, authentic, and personal to the person uttering them. They are an overflow of the passion for God one has in their heart. Which means they can be sung or chanted, shouted off rooftops or whispered into a friend’s ear. Confessions, written on a piece of paper, are just words, but when they find their confessor, they come alive and carry power. Like Peter, if you believe something to be true, you cannot help but confess so.

Yet over time, these statements of belief or *confessions of faith*, have become less of a witness to who Jesus is and more of a monopoly on truth. Their mere existence in our traditions has signaled to Millennials that there are right and wrong answers, and the church does not tolerate wrong answers. However our Reformed history and heritage tell us otherwise. Our very tradition views our confessions in such a way that would not only surprise a Millennial, but perhaps even convince her or him to discover their faith anew because at the core of Reformed theology is the belief that the church is not only reformed (*ecclesia reformata*), but still reforming (*semper reformanda*).

What does that really mean and why is that the case? According to Swiss theologian, Karl Barth, Reformed theology can be summed up in the existence of two

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<sup>35</sup> Philip Schaff, *A History of the Creeds of Christendom* (Franklin Square: Harper & Brothers, 1877), 4.

extremes.<sup>36</sup> On one extreme there is humanity. A Reformed perspective views the race of humans in a sober and even critical way, acknowledging our inherent limitations and sinfulness. While on the other extreme there is God. Unlike humankind, God is absolutely God and therefore absolutely good, and in God's ultimate goodness, God provides a mediator to straddle these two extremes in the person of Jesus Christ. We acknowledge that due to God's grace and power, we are reformed and transformed, but because we believe that the Spirit is still speaking and we, as humans, are still learning and listening, we are still in the process of being reformed and should be open to that possibility at all times.

### **From Personal to Official**

While it has a bad reputation for being overly negative, Reformed Theology is ultimately grounded in humility and hope. Nowhere else is this more clearly seen than in our view of confessions. In order to fully understand our distinct position, we must go back to the very beginning of confessional history. From the Gerasene demoniac who feared Jesus to the disciples who loved him, history's first confessions of faith can be found in Scripture. These early confessions were short and to the point in that they said nothing more and nothing less than that Jesus is Lord. I suppose the message didn't need to be clearer than that. After all, the early church consisted of those who knew Jesus when he was alive, heard him preach with their own ears, and watched him perform miracles with their very eyes. Jesus' lordship was all that needed to be proclaimed.

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<sup>36</sup> Karl Barth. *The Theology of the Reformed Confessions*. (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1923), 63.

So singular was the understanding of the gospel, that no written creeds or confessions were needed. In their place was the *regula fidei* or rule of faith, “a sort of communal linguistic awareness of the faith delivered to the apostles, which sufficed the church for generations. This gift of Spirit guided missionary proclamation, shaped instruction, identified heresy, and in general functioned wherever in the church’s life a brief statement of the gospel’s content was needed.”<sup>37</sup>

But like a game of telephone, the message began to disintegrate over time. As the church grew, the message needed to be reconfigured to reach new hearers in new cultural and historical situations.<sup>38</sup> Thus, more detailed confessions began to be employed in and around situations like baptism. Yet, it wasn’t until the 4<sup>th</sup> century that these communal confessions began to take on a more dogmatic quality. In response to Arius’ subordination of Jesus to God (a later version of Origen’s subordinationist theology), the church assembled its first council in Nicaea to respond to this idea that threatened the very notion of Jesus as Savior.<sup>39</sup> The result was an official creed affirming Jesus’ divinity due to being of the same substance as God and thus equal. We know this creed as the Nicene Creed.

The next significant period in our confessional history is where we start to see just how our Reformed theology impacts our understanding of confession. While the Lutheran Church was busy publishing their authoritative canon of confessional works, known as the *Book of Concord*, the Reformed church was simply compiling synopses and

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<sup>37</sup> Robert W. Jenson, *Canon and Creed* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2010), 15.

<sup>38</sup> Jenson, *Canon and Creed*, 4.

<sup>39</sup> Ibid., 66-67.

harmonies, the first being the Gevena *Harmonia confessionum* of 1581.<sup>40</sup> While regarded as the Reformed counterpart to the *Book of Concord*, the *Harmonia* never achieved the *Concord's* official status. Perhaps this is due to the fact that the Reformers who compiled the *Harmonia* did so in hopes of “reconciling the minds of dissentients, and uniting all the churches, distracted and separated as they were, in one common bond.”<sup>41</sup> The failure of the *Harmonia* to reach the *Concord's* status and the absence of any consequent universal Reformed Confession shows that such confessional uniformity is not consistent with the true intention of our tradition.

Why is this? True to its ancient motto, “*Ecclesia reformata, semper reformanda*,” the Reformed tradition has not closed off its confessional tradition, but remains distinctly “open”.

An open tradition anticipates that what has been confessed in a formally adopted confession takes its place in a confessional lineup, preceded by statements from the past and expectant of more to come as times and circumstances change. Thus, the Reformed tradition – itself a wide river with many currents – affirms that, for it, developing and adopting confessions is indeed an obligation, not an option. These contemporary confessions are recognized as extraordinary important for a church’s integrity, identity, and faithfulness. But they are also acknowledged to be relative to particular times and places. This “occasional” nature of a Reformed confession is as well a reminder that statements of faith are always subordinate in authority to Scripture.<sup>42</sup>

The very character of the Reformed tradition is that it is open to the Spirit’s movement in real time. In each of its confessions, the particularity of the time and place it was written are considered essential to the reading, interpreting, and practicing of its contents.

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<sup>40</sup> Jack Rogers, introduction to *Reformed Confessions of the 16<sup>th</sup> Century*, ed. Arthur C. Cochran (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2003), 15.

<sup>41</sup> Peter Hall, *The Harmony of Protestant Confessions* (London: J.F. Shaw, 1842), xv.

<sup>42</sup> Jack L. Stotts, introduction to *Reformed Confessions: Theology from Zurich to Barmen*, Jan Rohls (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1997), xi.

An example of the importance of the particularity of each confession is the Belhar Confession. Written in South Africa in 1982, the Belhar Confession appears to be a universally applicable confession on Christian community as it focuses on the themes of unity, reconciliation, and justice, and makes no mention of its historical context. In the same way, confessions like the Belgic Confession, the Heidelberg Catechism, and the Canons of Dort, can be seen as a universal call for all Christians to be good citizens by obeying their respective governing powers. Yet, it was the misinterpretation and misappropriation of the latter confessions that ultimately lead to the injustice and division that birthed the former confession.

The Dutch Reformed Mission Church (DRMC) in South Africa regarded the aforementioned Belgic Confession, Heidelberg Catechism, and Canons of Dort as their *Three Standards of Unity*. Written in Europe in the 16<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> centuries, these confessions emphasized obedience to government to disprove the notion that Christians were anarchists.<sup>43</sup> Yet when generally applied to their context in 20<sup>th</sup> century South Africa, the DRMC was able to use these confessions to perpetrate injustice within their own community. This injustice, known by its Afrikaans name, “Apartheid,” was the politically backed system of segregation and discrimination of blacks, and domination by whites. The PCUSA website introduces the Belhar Confession as “a protest against a heretical theological stance by the white Dutch Reformed Church that used the Bible and the Confessions to justify the harsh and unjust system of Apartheid.”<sup>44</sup>

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<sup>43</sup> “Belhar Confession: Historical Context,” Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), accessed December 15, 2014, [https://www.pcusa.org/site\\_media/media/uploads/theologyandworship/pdfs/the\\_belhar\\_confession-rogers.pdf](https://www.pcusa.org/site_media/media/uploads/theologyandworship/pdfs/the_belhar_confession-rogers.pdf).

<sup>44</sup> “Belhar Confession,” Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), accessed December 15, 2014, <https://www.pcusa.org/resource/belhar-rogers/>.

In the same way the apostles confessed their faith in a context that was particular to them, the church continues to confess from the places we live and the times we are living in. As Presbyterians and members of the Reformed tradition, we not only hold before us the importance of our particular histories, we also acknowledge that as finite beings we are unable to create a statement or creed, beyond what is clear in Scripture, that will be eternally and universally applicable to all Christians. It is from this place that we rightly keep our canon open.

But in practice, how open are we? Even with our official confessions, does the average layperson even know that we are open to new voices and perspectives? After all, we can't seem to agree on the color of the carpet in the sanctuary let alone our stance on same-sex marriage. But is dictating absolute truth even the intention of our confessions? While their aim is multi-fold in that they inspire our worship, preserve our identity, and respond to threats against our purity and unity, their authority is still limited.<sup>45</sup> For Reformed Christians, Scripture will always stand over and above what any of us has to say which means that our confessional statements have only a “provisional, temporary, relative authority.”<sup>46</sup> In true Reformed spirit, Schaff clarifies:

The value of creeds depends on the measure of their agreement with the Scriptures. In the best case a human creed is only an approximate and relatively correct exposition of revealed truth, and may be improved by the progressive knowledge of the church, while the Bible remains perfect and infallible.<sup>47</sup>

Millennials like Abby would benefit from the knowledge that they don’t have to prioritize creed over Scripture, but rather that all confessions simply witness to what has been divinely revealed to us through the Spirit and Scripture.

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<sup>45</sup> PCUSA Book of Confessions, viii-ix.

<sup>46</sup> PCUSA Book of Confessions, xiii.

<sup>47</sup> Philip Schaff, *A History of the Creeds*, 7.

## A Millennial Confession

Where does that leave us? If all of our *official* confessions come with a caveat of “relative authority”, why should we add to the cacophony of official voices with our personal ones? I can see two primary reasons. First and foremost, as we saw in the previous chapter, we must continue confessing because it is a natural response for Christians to do so. In the same way we communicate our affection and affirmation of our loved ones through word and action, we can communicate our affection and affirmation for God through word and action. The mainline church is clear on the action part, but through the practice of confessing our faith, we could do better on the word part. Secondly, as we have explored in this chapter, it is our responsibility as the Reformed to do so. It is this very real struggle to continue our search for truth that not only makes us truly Reformed but also speaks to the Millennial generation and their desire for authenticity.

The church has already seen how history has demanded that our tradition respond with an *official* confession, as in the case of the Belhar confession, but have we explored the possibility that certain situations actually require our *personal* confession? If there were ever such a time and situation, I would say the time is now and the situation is with our Millennials. Surprisingly enough, the oversaturation of modernization that Millennials are experiencing is what is making them hungry for tradition and an opportunity to pursue and proclaim truth.

In fact, many of the NEXTers gravitated towards FAPC because of its commitment to tradition that transcends the latest fads. In a world of temporality and shallow interactions, Millennials, more than any generation, need engagement with

something greater than themselves. The great obstacle is not the confessions themselves, but the belief that these traditions come with a take-it-or-leave-it expectation. But as we have just explored, our Reformed confessions expect no such thing. If we can reclaim something as problematic as the confessions for Millennials, we might just be able to reclaim church.

## CHAPTER 5

### A MILLENNIAL CONFESSTION OF FAITH

*Though I cannot see God in the flesh, I see him in the flesh of others. God is everywhere. I believe God created the earth, the sun and stars, mankind, plants, and animals. We are all children of God. God's fighting for us to win, to be at our best and to serve him. God is the overseer. Christ is the loving, caring side of God. The spirit moves us to do good, to walk in Christ's path and to obey God.*

*~Lizzie*

One thing is for certain, millennials are all about hype. They want to be in the center of the action and part of excitement. No longer just spectators, these young adults want to know what the most important conversation of the day is and how to get their opinion on the matter heard. They also need to feel like they are the only authors of their story rather than just consumers of an experience. Constantly trying to differentiate themselves from the cacophony of voices singing around them, this generation abhors the herd mentality and celebrates individualism.

Lizzie knows the importance of the ongoing conversation more than any of NEXTers. As a former Associate Producer for Piers Morgan Live and CNN Tonight, Lizzie's managed the social media aspect of these nightly news shows. Driven by the 24-hour news cycle, Lizzie became adept at breaking news and telling stories in a way that encourages viewer interaction. She will be first to tell you that the quickest way to start a

conversation, build buzz around it, and enable individual voices to be heard is through social media. I couldn't agree more.

In an effort to get the conversation started, I took to Facebook and started stirring the pot. On June 26, 2013, I went on Facebook and “shared” an article that an existing member of NEXT had emailed me. Once again, the conversation wasn’t about what I, the pastor, wanted the community to believe. The conversation originated within the group itself by one of their own. The article was entitled “*Church Without God - By Design*” from the CNN Religion Blog.<sup>48</sup> Members of the NEXT Facebook group were asked to weigh in on the blogger’s take on a service put on by a Humanist Community at Harvard University. The service had all the elements of a church service minus one important element: God. This first post generated little “buzz” with only two “likes” and two comments. Surprisingly, the comments were not directed towards the article’s observation on ritual for the irreligious, but rather the waning religiosity of the Millennial generation.

A week later, I posted another article. This time, it was from the Huffington Post and posed the often-conflicting relationship between faith and belief. This time, the post generated the same two “likes” as before but double the comments. Three of four posts on merely mentioned the article and one post actually answered the question I posed being, “Do your beliefs impact your behavior or does your behavior impact your beliefs?”

One month later on July 27, after a few more less-than-successful posts by yours truly, Lizzie followed my lead and posted another blog article from CNN with the

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<sup>48</sup> Dan Merica. “Church Without God - By Design (blog)”, <http://religion.blogs.cnn.com/2013/06/22/church-without-god-by-design/>, (June 22, 2013).

following introduction: “This column resonated with me. Do y'all agree with it? For me it's all about authenticity...” With six likes and eleven substance filled comments that were directly engaging the question and the article, Lizzie adeptly picked up on my effort to transform the NEXT Facebook page into a forum for real discussion. As a relatable Millennial, all Lizzie had to do was put her opinion out there for new ones to come rolling in. I could hear the buzzing in my ears.

### **Diagnosing the Problem**

One week later, on the same forum that these conversations were taking place, I posted an invitation to the first ever *BYOT (Bring Your Own Theology)* session at my apartment building’s outdoor terrace with the following note: “Grab a 6-pack, a bottle of wine, or just a Starbucks, and join us TMW as we engage in a non-judgmental, no-right-answers, let’s-figure-this-out-together discussion about our faith.” Note that this first-of-its-kind tell all event did not take place at the church. On August 1, 2013, fifteen 20/30 somethings gathered on a rainy day with beer, coffee, and wine in tow, and talked for almost three hours about the Bible. They talked about how they engage it, why they don’t engage it, what their fears and hangups around it were, and what they wanted from it. As the pastor, I intentionally kept my opinions to myself. I didn’t provide a lesson plan, a format, or even a roadmap. The only thing I did was ask questions. Like a therapist, I listened and then I asked more questions. Then when the conversation would stagnate or stall, I probed another area of emerging issues and questions.

By the end of the evening, this group of young adults that came primarily to drink and hangout with friends felt something more about Scripture. They didn’t necessarily

commit to reading the Bible more, they didn't even admit to *wanting* to read the Bible more, but they did realize they actually had feelings about Scripture that they didn't previously realize were even there. These strong feelings had been dormant up until that point simply because no one had asked them about them. After that gathering, I knew their sentiments were not limited to God's written word, but extended to other issues of faith, theology, and identity.

We convened three more BYOT sessions in the months that followed. The format, or rather the lack thereof, remained the same while the topic changed from session to session. We discussed Heaven and Hell, Sin and Salvation, and Belief and Practice. While each discussion varied, my one prevailing conclusion was that these young adults had strong opinions but not strong convictions. Every sentence was adamantly prefaced with phrases like "I think" and "I feel" but never "I believe" or "I know". Words like "truth" and "belief" were avoided entirely. Yet with every layer we peeled away, the remaining sentiment was fear, anxiety, and a desire for a clearer understanding of God and God's will for their life and the world around them.

### **Asking for Help**

At this point in my journey, I felt overwhelmed with information. Through the Facebook and BYOT conversations, I had a clearer sense of what was behind the great absence of conviction of this generation, but I felt paralyzed by how best to move forward. So I did the most important thing any leader can do when faced with this kind of a challenge: I asked for help. Left to my own devices and biases, I would have ultimately sought out a solution that geared towards someone like me, but by asking for

the opinions and perspectives of those outside of my sphere of understanding, my hope was to find a relevant way forward for this group and craft a pedagogical process that was accessible to all the participants.

While I knew that I wanted the end result to be a clearly articulated faith in the form of a confession, I wasn't certain how exactly I was supposed to get there. Therefore, I gathered two sets of "experts" that I could lean on for guidance and wisdom. My first set of "experts" was a diverse group of Millennials that represented the vast identities encompassed within this generation. I chose experts that represented a diversity of sexual orientation, race, socio-economic status, and professional background, but I also looked for those who exhibited leadership within the NEXT community.

To complement the BYOT conversations, I convened this smaller group of six young adults to fill in many of the areas that remained unclear or not fully fleshed out. They not only responded to the issues and challenges brought up at BYOT but provided deeper explanation and possible solutions. The most dominant stumbling block that kept coming up was God's judgment and the related sub-categories being afterlife, heaven, hell, salvation, other religions, and sin. Other less urgent categories included how to interpret Scripture and basic education on spiritual practices.

The most significant recommendation that this group of experts gave me was regarding the actual packaging and delivery of the project. At first, I intended on developing a blog that young adults, far and wide, could go to and participate in. In discussions around how much of a commitment they thought was reasonable, I was surprised to hear that most of this group felt that a daily practice was too rigorous and that even they wouldn't actively visit my blog page every day. They also felt that there

needed to be a very clear set of dates in which this project would be done so that the participants would feel it was manageable.

After much deliberation, the group decided that a daily email format was best because it would go right into the inboxes of the participants thereby eliminating the need to visit a website. Not only would these emails arrive directly into the inboxes of our participants thereby eliminating their role of having to remember to visit the blog site every day, but this format also felt more intimate and personalized than a simple web format because they would be written as a letter from me to the recipient, and not the entire world. Since the participants were primarily longtime members of the Presbyterian church and familiar with liturgical seasons, we decided that the 40 days of Lent would be a perfect timeframe for the project as Lenten devotionals and practices are familiar to this group and six weeks felt like a manageable commitment.

The other set of “experts” I leaned on were Christian educators with gifts in getting their students to understand and invest the subject matter. The first was the Rev. Dr. Craig Townsend, Vicar at St. James’ Church on the Upper East Side of Manhattan. For almost twenty years, Craig has run the educational programming at St. James’. With a Ph.D. in the History of Christianity and American Religious History, Craig has a very clear sense of the reasons why his members struggle to talk about their faith. With these struggles in mind, he founded and initiated *The Jesus Project* in his congregation. *The Jesus Project* is a yearlong program that “seeks to make our Biblical and theological knowledge useful in the articulation of our faith in Jesus Christ.”<sup>49</sup>

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<sup>49</sup> St. James Church. “Adult Education: The Jesus Project.” Accessed September 19, 2014, <http://www.stjames.org/education/adult-education/the-jesus-project1/#sthash.InjRVu1g.dpuf>.

The second educational expert was my colleague at FAPC, Dr. Aram Bae. Aram received her Ph.D. in practical theology and has taught clergy and educators around the country on how to make the Christian faith more accessible for youth. She has not only written curriculum for children and youth but has also developed a rigorous Confirmation curriculum complete with a rubric on how to write a statement of faith. This rubric was extremely helpful in helping me identify the ideal progression of topics to discuss and write about. Through my conversations with Aram, I began to see my project as a version of confirmation for young adults.

The final educational expert was my sister, Christine Han Perez. Christine is an English as a Second Language (ESL) teacher in Virginia and has her Masters in Secondary Education with a concentration in ESL. Christine helped me work through the engrained Christian vocabulary I often use and move past the “Christian-eze” to find a language and definitions that work for people of all faith backgrounds and histories. The participants in my project and potential participants may be churched, but it doesn’t mean they are learned in Christian subculture. I felt that this was an important aspect of education to get guidance on because as Marcus Borg put it,

For many, an increasing number, Christianity has become an unfamiliar language. Many people either do not know the words at all or, if they have heard the words, have no idea what they mean... Even more seriously, even for those who think they speak ‘Christian’ fluently, the faith itself is often misunderstood and distorted by many to whom it is seemingly very familiar.<sup>50</sup>

Craig, Aram, and Christine were instrumental in me figuring out how to address the areas of deeper study uncovered by my Millennial experts. During our time together, they walked me through relevant projects and programs they felt would help me equip the

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<sup>50</sup> Marcus Borg, *Speaking Christian: Why Christian Words Have Lost Their Meaning and Power – And How They Can Be Restored* (New York: Harper One, 2011), 55.

young adults to articulate their faith more clearly. Not only did they help me think of the right questions to ask, but they also provided me with helpful models to present information so that the Millennials engaging in this journey wouldn't feel like they were being told what to believe but rather were being equipped to figure it out for themselves.

With the great help and guidance of my Millennial experts and my educational experts, I implemented my project during Lent of 2014. The result was a 40-day devotional journey throughout the period of Lent entitled *Profess & Confess*. The outcome of the process was for participants to write their very own Confession of Faith, thus each aspect of the journey was geared towards inspiring, challenging, and questioning the participants to think about their faith and own their beliefs and faith narratives. The product was a daily email sent to individuals who signed up to participate. No one was included on the email list who didn't expressly desire to take part.

I intentionally included this detailed description of how I crafted my project because it explains why I did the things I did given my unique context. If you choose to use this model in your community, you will have to make different choices given your context. This project cannot and should not be duplicated just as it is and hastily applied to *your* particular community. Therefore, in this chapter, I have included a selection of the most noteworthy emails with an explanation behind the entry (Rationale), feedback or notes (Reflection), and my suggestions on how to tailor this method to your particular contexts (Recommendation). Depending on your setting, this project can be modified and duplicated to go out in email form (as I did), or as a small group study, a hardcopy devotional, or even as a blog.

## The Project

**Subject: What do YOU believe?**

**Date: March 1, 2014**

**Dear Charlene,**

What if someone asked you, "**What do you believe?**" What would you say? What if that same person asked you **WHY** you believe what you believe? Would you be able to answer?

This Sunday, 8 of our youth will read their very own Statements of Faith they wrote for Confirmation. After months studying Scripture, theology, and tradition, these youth are ready and willing to profess what they believe.

**Can you do the same?**

Contrary to popular belief, your personal confession of faith already exists in your head and heart. The hope of **Profess & Confess** is to find it.

Throughout Lent, we will explore the concept of belief and start writing our very own confessions of faith. For those of you who choose to actively participate, **I am asking you to commit to 40 days of study, prayer, and engagement.** It will be hard work. It will be challenging. But it will be worth it.

Join us **this Sunday at 12:30 pm** as we take the first step of this journey with a powerful session lead by President of New York Theological Seminary, Dr. Dale Irvin.

Hope to see you there,



**Rationale:** This introductory email was after several discussions and conversations around the notion of belief and being able to name one's belief. However, if someone were just entering into the process at this point, I included a familiar point of reference: youth confirmation. Because the audience was my FAPC Millennials, I had to make sure that there was a sense of challenge in the journey but not too time consuming, so I tried to maintain that tension in this opening invitation.

**Reflection:** Looking back, something that might have been helpful from the start was to say why articulating one's faith is even important. I could have approached this from a

number of standpoints: the first being that it helps the individual know God and themselves better, the second being that it would strengthen their faith, and finally, that the church needed to hear their unique voices.

**Recommendation:** When using this model in your own congregation, the most important starting point is knowing what questions you need to ask in your particular context. My first question was simply, “What do you believe?” This worked because New Yorkers are constantly being asked to explain and defend themselves. This directness wouldn’t be off putting to someone in my congregation but might be too harsh for someone in yours. I recommend starting out by writing down all the questions you might ask a young adult in your congregation around the concept of belief. Questions like, “Do you have a hard saying what you believe?” “What are your thoughts around the concept of belief?” “Do you think belief is a necessary part of being a Christian?”

**Subject: Are You a Sinner?**

**Date: March 5, 2014**

**Dear Charlene,**

You did it. You signed up for the Profess & Confess daily Lenten devotional which you will receive every evening from now until Easter.

**What exactly have you signed up for?**

Well, that depends on you. Maybe you are just looking for a devotional to carry you through Lent. Then I hope you find some inspiration and wisdom in these daily emails.

Or maybe you are looking to challenge yourself and engage in the process of writing your very own confession of faith and these devotionals will serve to guide you along that journey.

Truth be told, my hope is that you choose the latter. Why? Because it will be good for you. I am certain you already know what you believe in your heart, but there is power in confessing it "aloud" (or even on paper).

**So I encourage you....**

**No actually, I DARE you to give it all you've got.**

Commit to this daily discipline. Commit to the events. Commit to the process. I highly recommend you go out tonight and buy a notebook to start recording your prayers, responses, thoughts, and questions.

Just to get things going, I'll make today's assignment super easy. Just answer me this....

**Ponder:** Do you consider yourself a sinner? Why or why not?

**Read:** Romans 3:23 - *For all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God.*

**Pray:** Lord, expose in me the parts that are not of you. Amen.

Hope to see you Sunday,

*Charlene H. Powell*

**Rationale:** Based on Craig's recommendation, I made sure the first week was less about actually answering hard questions and more about weighing in on topics the participants already had opinions on. This would now only empower them early on but get them in the process of responding honestly as opposed to feeling like they had the "right" answers.

**Reflection:** By this point in the project, I was encouraged by the 36 people who signed up to receive the daily devotionals. Several participants were even engaging from other parts of the country and a few were out of the Millennial age range, but still asked if they could receive the emails.

**Recommendation:** Within the first week, have an idea of how often and in what ways you are planning on following up with your participants outside of the emails. These could be small group sessions, larger group gatherings, or even one-on-one meetings or phone calls.

**Subject: Who Are You?**

**Date: March 6, 2014**

**Dear Charlene,**

Some questions for you to ponder this chilly Thursday evening...

**Ponder:**

- How do I define myself in the world? How do I define myself religiously? Have either of these identities changed over time? How?

**Read:**

- Spiritual identity means we are not what we do or what people say about us. And we are not what we have. We are the beloved daughters and sons of God. ~Henri Nouwen
- Spirituality is meant to take us beyond our tribal identity into a domain of awareness that is more universal. ~Deepak Chopra

**Pray:**

- Lord, I want the world to see me as \_\_\_\_\_, but the way I see myself is as \_\_\_\_\_. Help me see myself as you do. Amen.

Hope to see you Sunday,

*Charlene H. Powell*

**Rationale:** After meeting with Dr. Dale Irvin, the participants of this project were tasked with the assignment of working on a Hermeneutical Self-Inventory written by Dr. Irvin of New York Theological Seminary (see Appendix 1). This inventory was meant to expose the participant's unintentional influencers when it came to faith. The hope of this inventory was to lead to deeper self-understanding and self-identification. I wanted the emails to work in conjunction with the self-inventory in helping these young adults to see that faith is a part of one's identity.

**Reflection:** Even after my experiences with the BYOT sessions, I was still very surprised to see everyone's response to Dr. Irvin's Hermeneutical Self-Inventory for Millennials.

For being so incredibly educated and informed, these NEXTers had an extremely hard time answering the most basic of question about how they identify religiously and what influences that identity. Based on this experience, I made sure to start slow and reiterate the most foundational questions from Dr. Irvin's Self-Inventory.

**Recommendation:** My strongest recommendation is to spend more time with the Self-Inventory. Throughout the project, time was the biggest obstacle. I knew I couldn't make the email assignments too long and I didn't have enough face time to administer this inventory during our meetings. I would encourage you to spend the pre-writing phase working through this inventory. It will guarantee that you will hit the areas that are most important for your particular context.

**Subject: Why Worry?**

**Date: March 7, 2014**

**Dear Charlene,**

I have been having a lot of conversations lately about anxiety, worry, and fear. It seems as if I am not the only one who obsesses over what will be instead of enjoying what already is.

With that in mind...

**Ponder:**

- What are you worried about these days? What fears lie underneath the worry and anxiety?

**Read:**

- **Matthew 6:25-34:** 'Therefore I tell you, do not worry about your life, what you will eat or what you will drink, or about your body, what you will wear. Is not life more than food, and the body more than clothing?

Look at the birds of the air; they neither sow nor reap nor gather into barns, and yet your heavenly Father feeds them. Are you not of more value than they? And can any of you by worrying add a single hour to your span of life? And why do you worry about clothing?

Therefore do not worry, saying, "What will we eat?" or "What will we drink?" or "What will we wear?" For it is the Gentiles who strive for all these things; and indeed your heavenly Father knows that you need all these things. But strive first for the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well.

'So do not worry about tomorrow, for tomorrow will bring worries of its own. Today's trouble is enough for today

**Pray:**

- List out the things that are currently worrying you and offer them up to the Lord.
- Almost as a mantra, prayerfully repeat this promise from **Jeremiah 29:11**.
  - *For I know the plans I have for you," declares the Lord, "plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future.*

Hope to see you Sunday,

*Charlene H. Powell*

**Rationale:** From the very beginning, I was mindful of not having such a rigid schedule of topics that I wasn't able to allow the Spirit to move through this project. Therefore I made room for several days that would be more devotional than educational. This was

one of those days. I made sure to tie into what was going on in the larger project but kept the content and responsive activity more meditational.

**Reflection:** In many of the one-on-one conversations I was having with participants, I was getting the sense that many were experiencing stress and anxiety in their own lives and the start of this project was adding to it. I expected the early stages of the process to be the most trying because there was no tangible fruit yet. The beginning was just a lot of hard conversations and probing questions. My interaction with the participants reminded me that there was an important pastoral component at the heart of the project. This email was to remind the participants of God's faithfulness and to center their work and studies as an act of worship, rather than a duty or a chore.

**Recommendation:** Be flexible and check in with your participants. A process as intense and personal as this one cannot be done in isolation. While the curriculum can be modified for personal study, this project is meant to be done in community. And the community needs a pastoral presence. It needs someone to be taking the pulse of its participants, checking in, keeping them accountable, and praying for them. Through these interactions, it is impossible not to let what is happening in the lives of the group influence the content of the project.

**Subject: Nothing But the Blood**

**Date: March 10, 2014**

**Dear Charlene,**

Continuing our conversation on sin...

When talking about churches that readily engage the concept of sin, the word "**redeeming**" was appropriately thrown out. We can't have a conversation about sin without discussing redemption.

The dictionary defines **redemption** as **deliverance or rescue**.

Hopefully you see where I am going with this...

1. Describe an incident where you felt delivered or rescued.
2. How have you felt **redeemed** by God?
3. Spend some time meditating on how God "delivers" us from sin then respond in prayer.

If you need some musical assistance, [listen to this hymn](#) for some inspiration.

Wishing you a blessed week,



**Rationale:** As revealed through the BYOT conversations and by my Millennial experts, sin was one of, if not *the* most challenging issue for these young adults. Sin was directly related to the judgment and exclusivity of the church they disdained so much. Yet because of their deep sense of justice, they couldn't dismiss the concept of sin entirely. I could have spent a lot more time on the notion of sin, but I felt that would ultimately end up being focused on the wrong thing. The young adults knew what sin was, but their biggest issue was actually with their confusion around the concept of "redemption". This email sought to redirect the focus on God's grace and mercy rather than God's wrath and anger.

**Reflection:** This is another example of a responsive email. It was written in response to our in-person gathering on March 9, 2014. The agenda was to work through the

Hermeneutical Self-Inventory, but one participant asked a question about sin which launched a dozen more questions. In an ideal world, each email would have been followed up by a group discussion to help process the material in real time, but that was hardly feasible especially with a group of over-scheduled New Yorkers. Even though I had plans for our time together, it was quickly taken over by the lingering issues from other emails.

**Recommendation:** For your in-person check-ins, whether you do them individually or as a group, bring a list of potential questions and topics but allow the group to decide what they want to discuss. Start each discussion by asking, “What email/topic/idea/activity stuck out to you this week?” Then ask, “Why?” Always ask why.

**Subject: Getting Inventoried**

**Date: March 11, 2014**

**Dear Charlene,**

Let's continue working on that fancy little [\*\*Hermeneutical Self-Inventory\*\*](#) (click to read) that the president of a seminary created especially for us (no biggie).

Hebrews 4:12 says, "For the word of God is living and active, sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing to the division of soul and of spirit, of joints and of marrow, and discerning the thoughts and intentions of the heart."

That's some pretty intense stuff. When was the last time Scripture pierced you?

I know that most of us aren't spending regular time in the Bible (myself included), but the Bible is meant to inspire and even provoke us. So tonight, I challenge you to spend 5 minutes actually reading it.

If you don't do the old "open-the-Bible-and-read-whatever-page-you-land-on" trick, allow me to provide some possible selections.

- [\*\*1 John 3\*\*](#)
- [\*\*Romans 5\*\*](#)
- [\*\*Ephesians 4\*\*](#)

Then ponder the following questions....

1. What did you like about the passage? Dislike?
2. What part do you **believe** about the passage? Why?
3. Have you heard this passage before? Where and in what context?

Peruse the Self-Inventory after you have spent some time in the Word and see what questions you can answer.

Wishing you a blessed week,

*Charlene H. Powell*

**Rationale:** The other pressing concern of these young adults that emerged in the observation phase was their issue with the Bible. This was closely tied with their conflict with a God who judges and rejects God's own people. Most of their experiences with the Bible were limited to times it has been used to justify hate and unkindness. When asked what verses they knew, not a single person could offer a citation or even correct wording,

but just details about how the Bible says that homosexuality is a sin or that Jesus is the only way to salvation. This email aimed to introduce them to passages that were hopeful yet not fluffy. I wanted them to be inspired and challenged.

**Reflection:** This was an interesting exercise for me as I looked for passages that I felt were life-giving and life-affirming. Because of my own complicated relationship with Scripture, I didn't feel it was fair or responsible to throw them a softball passage that would attempt to cover over the many problematic passages. I wanted to maintain the struggle while giving them a reason to keep fighting with the text.

**Recommendation:** As often as possible, include Scripture. It will be and should be the one constant in this process as your presence will be limited, as is the presence of anyone with whom they are journeying. Since most Millennials are Scripturally challenged, using Scripture throughout the process will help them develop a healthy relationship with the text and hopefully will encourage them to turn to the Bible more often for comfort, wisdom, and guidance.

**Subject: Old White Guy in the Sky**

**Date: March 15, 2014**

**Dear Charlene,**

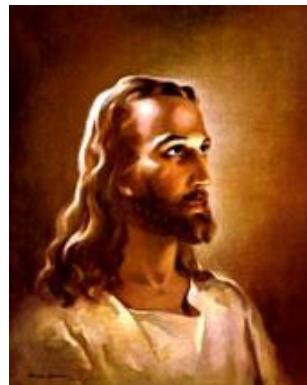
Happy Saturday folks!

Today's exercise involves your imagination and maybe even some colored pencils or markers. Don't be shy! Pull out those old school supplies.

**Draw a picture of God.**

You heard right. Draw whatever image pops into your mind. If you picture the Almighty surfing on a cloud, draw the cloud as well. Put on paper whatever your mind conjures up.

Remember, you are the only person who is going to see this so be honest.



**Interesting Fact:**

*In 1941, Warner Sallman painted a portrait of Jesus that has become the industry standard of what people picture when thinking of our Lord and Savior.*

*Most likely, this is not even close to what the historical Jesus actually looked like, but it might as well be based on its popularity and influence.*

**Hopefully, our understanding of God and Christ will continue to change and grow over time, but that also includes our perceptions.**

Throughout Randy's class tomorrow, pay special attention to what new ideas you were exposed to about God and what older notions no longer seem to apply.

Praying for each of you,

*Charlene H. Powell*

**Rationale:** The Presbyterian Church in the United States of America is extremely white.

No way around this truth. That is the reality in which we are living in. FAPC is one of the more diverse Presbyterian Churches in the denomination and it is still over 80% Caucasian. What's more is that FAPC has only called white, male senior pastors. I am the first women of color to ever be called as a pastor in FAPC's extensive history. We aren't the only church in America with this issue. If you ask most Christians what Jesus

looks like, they will describe the image above painted by Warner Sallman in 1941. I wanted to bring forward the realization that we have culturally constructed images of God in our minds that are limiting us from seeing the entirety of God. The quickest way to figure out what that image is is to draw it.

**Reflection:** The participants had a really hard time with this exercise. At first, the complaint was, “I’m not artistic. I can’t draw very well.” To which I replied, “It doesn’t need to look pretty. Draw a stick figure. Just draw whatever comes to mind.” When pushed, the participants reluctantly drew a picture of a white man with a white beard in a white robe standing on a cloud. The ones who made excuses about their artistic skills complained because they knew their image was cliché and ill informed, but they didn’t have any other image to replace it. I found the discussion around this exercise to be fascinating as we imagined new ways to envision God. As result, we latched on to the metaphor of God as water because it can take on so many different characteristics and forms.

**Recommendation:** When a participant says, “I can’t do it,” help them find another way at approaching the exercise. As much as possible, don’t let anyone skip an activity because they found it too hard or challenging. Most likely, that is the most important activity that person needs to focus on. Walk with them and help them uncover what they find so impossible and remind there are no right answers. Take failure out of the equation.

**Subject: Creation in 4 Parts**

**Date: March 17, 2014**

Dear Charlene,

This week, we will continue exploring the notion of **God as Divine Creator**. For those of you who missed Randy's class, I will be recapping throughout the week.

Now that we are getting down to the nitty gritty, I encourage you to start writing down those belief statements that make sense to you and your faith practice (we'll discuss this more tmw). Even statements as simple as, "**I believe God is the Creator**," are important to note.

To begin, Randy used the following subdivisions to break up the Doctrine of Creation.

1. **God as Creator:** God in distinction from everything that is not God
2. **The Creature:** That which is not God but is from God
3. **Evil & Sin:** That which is not God and is not from God
4. **Providence:** God's direction of everything that is not God to its divinely attended end

Using those subdivisions, read this alternative Creation account in [\*\*JOB 38\*\*](#) and note what sticks out to you, what illuminates God as Creator to you, and what unsettles you.

Looking forward to seeing you tomorrow,

*Charlene H. Powell*

**Rationale:** NEXT is a part of the larger church. It is not an island. While this project was its own thing, I never wanted to divorce what we were doing in *Profess & Confess* from what was going in the larger body of the church. During the same time these emails were going out, FAPC was offering a 4-week course on doctrine. Because the subject matter was complementary to *Profess & Confess*, I made sure to include it in our conversation and study.

**Reflection:** The interplay between this course and the emails was very effective. I juxtaposed the creation account presented in this account with Job 38 and was able to not only delve into the important topic of God as Creator but further flesh out how Scripture can seem contradictory and challenge us with its violent imagery.

**Recommendation:** Use the resources at your disposal. If someone said something better than you, use their words. If a class is being taught in your congregation or in your community, take advantage of it. As much as possible, accept help and try to utilize the larger community your participants are living in.

**Subject: The Meaning of Revelation**

**Date: March 19, 2014**

Dear Charlene,

We can't talk about God and creation without broaching the subject of **REVELATION**.

In the most literal sense, revelation is the "**unveiling**", "**uncovering**", or "**disclosure**" of something previously hidden. Revelation doesn't confirm that which we already know. It is utterly surprising and even disturbing. It can shake us at our core.

Scripture is filled with revelatory events where God crashes into human life in an unexpected way.

- **Moses** and the Burning Bush (Exodus 3)
- **David** realizing he committed murder (2 Sam 12)
- **Paul** experiencing Jesus (Galatians 1:12)

And the most obvious revelation: **CREATION**. God revealing God's self through the sun, moon, stars, and sky.

So here's your homework for today and quite possibly, the **MOST IMPORTANT ASSIGNMENT** of this entire process...

**Write down a time where God revealed God's self to you. What new thing did you learn about God and yourself?**

Looking forward to hearing your stories,



P.S. Maybe some of you are looking for a simple primer on all things Christian, theology, and the Bible. [\*\*Faith Seeking Understanding by Daniel Migliore\*\*](#) is it. This book is everything and the best \$20 you'll ever spend.

**Rationale:** This email was almost to the halfway point of the project, so I felt it was time to start asking the leading questions that would lead to a written confession of faith. To me the most important question and the perfect starting point was locating the point of revelation in the participant's life. I wanted to start here because I knew it would make the confessions more personal and less creedal. If left to their own devices, these young adults would have followed the Nicene formula and listed of beliefs that they assumed were the right answers. The revelation accounts of Moses, David, and Paul were

narrative enough that it gave the participants permission to start from a place that was unique to them.

**Reflection:** This email signaled a new part of the entire journey. Just as the beginning was difficult in its probative quality, I knew this phase would be hard because it forced the Millennials to start getting words on paper that they would have to ultimately own.

**Recommendation:** When you transition to this phase in your process, ramp up your pastoral check-ins. This means start sending out emails, making calls or meeting for coffee so you can ask where your participants are seeing God, what aspects they are struggling with, and what you can be praying about for them. Make sure your participants feel supported and accepted as they start writing their confessions.

**Subject: Who Do You Like Better?**

**Date: March 25, 2014**

**Dear Charlene:**

Who do you like better: God of the Old Testament or Jesus of the New Testament?

**WHY?**

Most Christians' immediate response is Jesus Christ. When asked "why", they say things like, "Jesus is much nicer, less judgmental, and more compassionate, whereas God is scary, vengeful, and mean." Yet, as Christians, we believe the God of the OT and Jesus of the NT are one and the same?

***How can this be? Where is their unity? Where is their connection? What about them is consistent?***

Ponder these following passages that paint both "Gods" in a new light.

**God of the Old Testament:**

- **Isaiah 43:1** - But now thus says the Lord, he who created you, O Jacob, he who formed you, O Israel: Do not fear, for I have redeemed you; I have called you by name, you are mine.
- **Zephaniah 3:17** - The Lord, your God, is in your midst, a warrior who gives victory; he will rejoice over you with gladness, he will renew you in his love; he will exult over you with loud singing.

**Jesus of the New Testament:**

- **Matthew 10:34** - 'Do not think that I have come to bring peace to the earth; I have not come to bring peace, but a sword.'
- **Matthew 7:21-23** - 'Not everyone who says to me, "Lord, Lord", will enter the kingdom of heaven, but only one who does the will of my Father in heaven. On that day many will say to me, "Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in your name, and cast out demons in your name, and do many deeds of power in your name?" Then I will declare to them, "I never knew you; go away from me, you evildoers."

Thinking of you all,



**Rationale:** At this point, I wanted to revisit Scripture again from a more proactive standpoint, as opposed to a reactive standpoint. Due to the strained relationship between Millennials and the Bible, I started out by lifting up the issues that were at play and then worked to smooth over some of the misconceptions and hesitations. With the participants

starting to write their confessions, I wanted to come back to Scripture but in a way that prompted them to say something about Scripture. While still challenging their hastily held notions about the Bible, this email was aimed at empowering the NEXTers to really look at the Bible and do some digging. By giving them the choice between the Old and New Testament, they couldn't default to outright rejection of the entire text but had to wrestle with it and claim it for themselves.

**Reflection:** In many ways, this process ended up being to the participants what seminary was to me: a time of exploration and discovery. One of my greatest discoveries from seminary was the Old Testament. Sure, I had read the Old Testament before, but I never liked it much. After taking a class on God in the Old Testament, I fell deeply in love with the passionate, often neurotic love story between Yawheh and the people of Israel. Fast-forward to my conversations with my NEXTers about the Old and New Testament and many of their opinions mirrored my pre-seminary days. “The Old Testament is too violent and boring. The New Testament is full of love and forgiveness.” Because I strongly believe that the two must be held in constant conversation with one another, I made sure to write an email that challenged the idea of a mean Old Testament God vs. a kind New Testament Jesus. My hope was that this exercise would not only peak their interest in reading the Bible more, but also to give the Old Testament a chance.

**Recommendation:** Earlier I recommended including Scripture in as many of your emails/sessions as possible. I want to further expand that recommendation to having your participants open their Bible as often as possible. Be careful of doing too much too soon because the participants will get intimidated and overwhelmed, but offer very specific exercises where they will have to do some thinking beyond just reading the text.

**Subject: Bono Said What?**

**Date: March 26, 2014**

**Dear Charlene:**

Thanks to your fellow NEXTer, **Abby Laughery**, your devotional today is not only a video but a little rock'in'roll.



**Bono: Who Is Jesus?**

Let me pose to you many of the same SIMPLE questions from this amazing interview...

1. ***Is Christ your way to understand God? How?***
2. ***Do you pray to know the will of God?***
3. ***What or who was Jesus as far as you're concerned?***
4. ***Has Jesus changed your life as God or just an ordinary man?***
5. ***Do you believe in "miracles"?***
6. ***Do you pray to the risen Jesus?***
7. ***Do you believe he made promises that will come true?***

To my walking miracles,

*Charlene H. Powell*

P.S. [\*\*Here is the excerpt\*\*](#) Abby mentioned from Mere Christianity on Jesus as Lunatic, Liar, or Lord.

**Rationale:** Having sent emails prompting confessional responses on God and Scripture, I wanted to make sure to send one on Jesus without too much delay. Once again, this is an example of knowing what I wanted to talk about but being flexible to the responses I was getting from the group. One of the participants posted a video from U2 front man, Bono, who was essentially confessing *his* faith in Jesus during an interview. I felt that having real life examples was helpful in the process of simply getting the words out.

**Reflection:** Whenever I see someone who is not a pastor or a religious leader talk about his or her faith, I get excited. Especially with celebrities, I am always surprised to see them put themselves on the line like that. We live in a world where celebrities are seen as demi-gods and so when the world can see someone who is famous acknowledging a power that is greater than them, we can't help but take notice. I find Bono to be particularly thoughtful when it comes to talking about his faith so I wanted to include him in the project.

**Recommendation:** Anytime a participant is taking the initiative to send you a response, share a thought via social media, or react in a more public way, use it. Affirm it. Incorporate it. Not only do we need to start asking these Millennials the hard questions we have been dodging for so many years, we need to listen carefully to their answers and specifically name what we hear them saying. Often times, they think they are just reacting and don't know they are confessing their faith. It is our job to point that out to them.

**Subject: God's Care vs. God's Control**

**Date: April 6, 2014**

**Dear Charlene:**

See **John Calvin's meditation on Divine Providence...**

1. All events happen by the ordination of God.
2. All things contribute to the advantage of the godly.
3. The hearts of humanity and all their endeavors are in the hand of God.
4. Providence watches for the safety of the righteous.
5. God has a special care of his elect.
6. God in various ways curbs and defeats the enemies of the Church.
7. He overrules all creatures, even Satan himself, for the good of his people.
8. He trains the godly to patience and moderation.
9. He shakes off their lethargy, and urges them to repentance.
10. When the godly become negligent or imprudent in the discharge of duty, Providence reminds them of their fault.
11. It condemns the iniquities of the wicked.
12. It produces a right consideration of the future, rendering the servants of God prudent, diligent, and active.
13. It causes them to resign themselves to the wisdom and omnipotence of God, and, at the same time, makes them diligent in their calling.
14. Though human life is beset with innumerable evils, the righteous, trusting to Divine Providence, feel perfectly secure.

**In concert with Scott's presentation, how do you understand the following:**

- **Election/Predestination**
- **God's care for all of humanity vs. just Christians**
- **God's intervention in our free will**

If you are struggling with this doctrine, good. God's providence and care is one of the most problematic theological conundrums.

If you do only one thing this evening, write down if you found ANY good news in what Scott taught or what Calvin wrote above.

Thinking of you all,

*Charlene H. Powell*

**Rationale:** This email was the decisive move to start engaging the Reformed tradition, theologians, and creeds. I made sure not to include these early on as they would have been too leading either by influencing the participant's confession or discouraging it.

Since a bulk of the theological work had begun, I felt it was the right time to start

working with the father of our tradition, John Calvin. Well known for double predestination and total depravity, Calvin isn't particularly popular amongst Millennials. Similar to the Bible, I felt it was important for the participants to read Calvin themselves instead of just taking Wikipedia's word for it. Since the concept of God's providence was being covered in an Adult Education course, I thought it was a good segue into talking about Calvinism.

**Reflection:** Millennials are all about living in the gray. They strive to hear both sides of the story and not making snap judgments based on superficial information. Ironically enough, they do it all the time. The most popular dating websites amongst this generation are structured around judging a book by its cover. That being said, I made a point to challenge the young adults whenever I felt their strongly held opinions weren't held up by much more than a recent post on Facebook. The Old Testament and Calvin were at the top of the list of things Millennials hate but don't really know why so naturally, I included both in my project.

**Recommendation:** I know that I have said it is important not to overwhelm the participants and to affirm their progress as much as possible, BUT it is also important not to make this process too easy. Millennials need to feel like there is a tangible accomplishments to their efforts. Don't be afraid to present difficult subject matters and complicated ideas. However, when you do decide to go there, set up your email or exercise with a treatise of sorts as to why it is worth their energy and attention.

**Subject: The Unexpected Ones**

**Date: April 11 2014**

**Dear Charlene,**

For the past few days, I have sent you a few Confessions of Faith to read, analyze and critique. They were of a more traditional nature.

This weekend's confessional examples are non-traditional. In fact, I doubt the authors even considered them confessional at all, but I beg to differ. They are honest, raw, and beautiful.

I implore you to take the time over the next few days to read them all and see which ones really hit home with you or if you find yourself gravitating back towards the more traditional models.

**In response to the question on if [Switchfoot](#) is a Christian band, lead singer, Jon Foreman replied:**

- To be honest, this question grieves me... Does Lewis or Tolkien mention Christ in any of their fictional series? Are Bach's sonata's Christian? What is more Christ-like, feeding the poor, making furniture, cleaning bathrooms, or painting a sunset? ...

Yes. My songs are a part of my life. But judging from scripture I can only conclude that our God is much more interested in how I treat the poor and the broken and the hungry than the personal pronouns I use when I sing.

I am a believer. Many of these songs talk about this belief. An obligation to say this or do that does not sound like the glorious freedom that Christ died to afford me. I do have an obligation, however, a debt that cannot be settled by my lyrical decisions. My life will be judged by my obedience, not my ability to confine my lyrics to this box or that.

[Awake My Soul](#) is the 10th track on [Mumford & Sons](#)' debut album [Sigh No More](#).

- How fickle my heart and how woozy my eyes  
I struggle to find any truth in your lies  
And now my heart stumbles on things I don't know  
My weakness I feel I must finally show  
Lend me your hand and we'll conquer them all  
But lend me your heart and I'll just let you fall  
Lend me your eyes I can change what you see  
But your soul you must keep, totally free

How fickle my heart and how woozy my eyes  
I struggle to find any truth in your lies  
And now my heart stumbles on things I don't know  
My weakness I feel I must finally show  
In these bodies we will live, in these bodies we will die. Where you invest your love,  
you invest your life.

Awake my soul, awake my soul

You were made to meet your maker

**On Love is the first poem in Khalil Gibran's book entitled *The Prophet*. Here is an excerpt:**

- When love beckons to you, follow him,  
Though his ways are hard and steep.  
And when his wings enfold you yield to him,  
Though the sword hidden among his pinions may wound you.

And when he speaks to you believe in him,  
Though his voice may shatter your dreams  
as the north wind lays waste the garden.

For even as love crowns you so shall he crucify you. Even as he is for your growth so  
is he for your pruning.  
Even as he ascends to your height and caresses your tenderest branches that  
quiver in the sun,  
So shall he descend to your roots and shake them in their clinging to the earth.

To Awakening Our Souls...

*Charlene H. Powell*

**Rationale:** My group of participants included every type of profession from investment bankers to actors, lawyers to musicians. I knew I would receive confessions as tight as the Brief Statement of Faith and as loose as a Beatles song, so I wanted to make room for the different styles by presenting non-Scriptural, non-creedal confessions. Along the same lines as the Bono clip, I sourced an interview with a well-known rock band, Switchfoot, in which they address being categorized as a “Christian” band. Aside from the fact that I love the band, I found their response to be particularly Millennial (in a good way). The second confession was taken from the Mumford and Son’s song *Awake My Soul*. Not overtly Christian, it bears the honesty I was hoping from my participants. The third confession is from the Khalil Gibran poem *On Love* from *The Prophet*. I included this poem because it is poetic and emotional but with a very clear depiction of Christ as Savior whereas the other confessions were more abstract.

**Reflection:** From the very beginning stages of this project, I knew I wanted to explore the various types of confessions out there, but I ended up not having enough time to do this as extensively as I planned. Yet I realized that just by receiving these very unconventional confessions as acceptable was enough. I received very positive feedback from many of the participants about the song in particular because it was already familiar to them and they were able to see it in a new light.

**Recommendation:** I have a unique advantage in that I am in the same life stage and have the same generational outlook as my participants, but as with any generation, there are mediums that cross those barriers. Music and film are two of those mediums. I encourage you to use current music and movies to help inspire your participants to talk about and engage their faith. You don't have to be a Millennial to be able to relate to and communicate with them.

**Subject: Getting the Words Out**

**Date: April 15, 2014**

**Dear Charlene,**

Do you see the light at the end of the tunnel?  
Does that finish line feel within reach?  
Can you believe our journey is almost over?

I know this process has looked different for each and every one of you. For some of you it has been refreshingly easy while for others of you, it has been surprisingly hard. Some of you have made it a daily discipline while others of you have struggled to do it even weekly.

No matter what your experience, I STILL challenge you to work on a draft of your Confession of Faith this week. The hardest part is getting the words out and on paper, so if it is even 1 sentence of 5, **WRITE A DRAFT THIS WEEK.**

To help you, I have included the resources I handed out at the Writing Workshop this past Sunday.

**1) Find a medium that works for you**

- Narrative
- Poetry
- Song
- Creed

**2) Start from a place of experience**

- Where you saw God
- Where you were moved to acknowledge the existence of a great power
- Where God provided for your needs
- Where God answered a prayer

**3) Consider what that tells you about God**

- Is that a quality of God, Jesus, the Spirit, neither, all?
- Does it match up with what you have seen or read in Scripture?
- Does it match up with what you have seen or experienced in the church?

**4) How then does that impact your belief?**

- Taking your experiences and your observations, what can you say you believe?
- Why does this conclusion matter to you and your faith?
- How do you know or understand the divine better through this revelation?

[\*\*CLICK HERE\*\*](#) if you would like to reference the Statement of Faith rubric used by our youth confirmands.

To Going Out with a Bang,

*Charlene H. Powell*

**Rationale:** This was the final official email that went out to the participants. The purpose of this email was much more functional and practical in nature. It sought to bring together everything that we had been discussing and organize it into the final product: a confession of faith. Throughout the project, I was careful not to define exactly what a confession of faith looks and sounds like. In order for these confessions to truly belong to each participant, the content and structure had to be their own. But without any guidance, I saw that many of the participants were at a standstill. I brought back many of the questions I had been asking throughout the process and added some new ones that I felt might inspire them to start writing.

**Reflection:** After sending this final email, I let out a sigh of relief and then breathed in deeply as I waited with bated breath for the confessions to start coming in. My emotional response to being done with the emails was initially anxiety. Had I provided them with enough inspiration and information? Did I push too hard or not hard enough? It was the same nervous feeling one gets after saying something important on a phone call and not being able to see or read the response of the person on the other end of the line. You just have to wait.

**Recommendation:** No doubt, you will be fully invested in the outcome of this process by this point. If you were lukewarm at the start, you will be burning to know what confessions will pour out of your participants. There is nothing you can do at this point but pray and send out some final notes of encouragement to the ones who have journeyed with you every step of the way. If you haven't already done so, at this point I would encourage you to write your very own confession of faith.

## CHAPTER 6 FOLLOWING

*It is my aim to explore my doubt and challenge my beliefs  
As we explore our collective doubt, and challenge our collective beliefs.  
And in so doing, further our collective understanding so that we may inch closer  
towards understanding the one, pure, holy truth which evades us.*

*Whether it will be possible for me to obtain this understanding in this life,  
I have my doubts, but perhaps it is possible in the next;  
No doubt, it is possible for the sum of my being and efforts in this life  
to contribute to this understanding in the future*

*Ultimately, we are called to investigation  
to explain the mystery that flows through all of us  
Connects us and divides us, that persists without limits  
from before time to the present and into the great beyond.*

*I pray for the courage to continue this exploration of faith  
Aware of the great comfort that comes from standing idly by  
numb and separated from the Existence  
And terrified to get closer, for I too have been burned by that fire of realization  
that comes when approaches the hard truth of the divine.*

*~Mark*

Ironically enough, this project initially started out as an effort to reclaim the concept of evangelism for the progressive church. As a fairly “green” pastor, I was worried that we weren’t doing enough to win people to God and into the church. With whispers of the church not growing but shrinking, I couldn’t help but notice that the mainline church wasn’t engage in the timeless Christian practice of evangelism and naively assumed we had too much baggage when it came to evangelism and too many

bad experiences with “hellfire and brimstone” theology. I lamented the fact that no one was talking about God anymore, especially my generation. Quickly concluding that this was the extent of the problem, I set out to redefine and reclaim the “E” word. I naively assumed that once we recovered its true meaning, then people would start sharing their faith. But I soon realized that our view of evangelism was the least our problems. It wasn’t that we weren’t willing to share our faith. It’s that we didn’t know what to say about our faith.

Early on in that exploratory phase, I had a conversation with a mentor, Dr. Dale Irvin, which continues to haunt me. In a discussion regarding the history of Christian evangelism and the existence of other faiths, he remarked that anyone who sets out to convert someone has to be willing to be converted as well. He writes in his book *Christian Histories, Christian Traditioning*:

Christians have long called on others inside and outside their churches to conversion and change. But Christians must also be open to their own change, on the basis of their own biblical and theological heritage of *metanoia* [repentance] and grace. So Christian tradition must always remain open to its own conversion inasmuch as it is to remain Christian.<sup>51</sup>

He goes on to challenge the church to explore new modes of Christian community while holding close the histories and pasts that have shaped us. However, we must not let these very histories, or traditions, bind or define us. If anything, they should give us the courage to reinvent ourselves and explore new and diverse ways of finding God.<sup>52</sup> It is our very faith in a living God that emboldens and enables us to do so.

Inspired by that courage, I let go of the histories and pasts that have shaped me and allowed my project to go in a new direction. Instead of gravitating towards the

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<sup>51</sup> Dale Irvin, *Christian Histories, Christian Traditioning* (New York: Orbis Books, 1998), 127.

<sup>52</sup> Ibid., 140-141.

evangelical moment in which we share our faith *beyond* the church, I found myself drawn to the confessional moment in which we acknowledge our faith *within* the church. Not only did this seem to be the more appropriate approach but also the more terrifying one. It was from that place that my project was born. With this new direction guiding me, I dismissed the notion of conversion. After all, it no longer applied... or so I thought. It wasn't until I received Mark's Confession of Faith that I realized how wrong I was.

When all is said and done, there was one possible outcome that I never fully entertained. At best, I hoped this journey towards finding one's very own confession of faith would change lives, invigorate faith, and bring Millennials closer to God. At the very least, I hoped that the participants of my project would be more confident, even if just a little bit, in what they held to be real and true. I never imagined that the clarity might reveal the *absence* of belief. Such was the case with Mark.

From the moment I met him, I knew he was a profound thinker. He demonstrated a great ability to empathize with every perspective expressed during our group discussions, but there was a certain sense of loneliness to every question he asked and every doubt he admitted to. I learned in later conversations that Mark greatly struggles with having faith in not only the god of Christianity but any god. So deep is this struggle that it has often resulted in a sadness so deep that it overtakes and consumes him. In that way, Mark is not like most of the young adults who signed up for *Profess & Confess*. At the very least, most of the NEXTers have always identified as Christian to a certain extent. Mark doesn't even know if he believes in God, but he wants to. His desire for that connection with the divine is so great that he came back to church after a hiatus during college, joined FAPC, got involved with NEXT, and even became a church

officer. With all the ways he was staying busy with church and ignoring his struggles, Mark almost evaded his persisting doubt. Almost.

When he signed up for the project, I was elated. Because I was doing this project with Christians who were active in the church, I assumed each exercise would only have positive responses. I became convinced that this would be the experience that would ultimately cure Mark of all his doubts and fears and steady his wavering belief. This assumption was further fortified with each pastoral check-in I was making with other participants. Participant after participant reported the immeasurable life change they were experiencing with all the work they were doing. One participant, Annie, emailed me midway through the journey, writing:

I find that when I'm studying about God, I more naturally attribute things in my life to him (makes sense right), so thank you so much for leading this study right now. I've been having a hard time lately, but each day this week has brought new extraordinary mercies and blessings that I could never have seen coming. I'm overcome with God's goodness, and I'm eagerly anticipating tomorrow, because if this has been my week so far... what new amazing gift is coming next? I've been living in hope of all things coming together for a while, I just didn't realize that the thing that would happen would be God turning on a faucet of miracles. I am so overwhelmed.<sup>53</sup>

With this kind of feedback, I was emboldened to push harder and demand more of my NEXTers. With this increased intensity, I expected more positive affirmations of their growing faith and devotion to God.

That all changed when I received Mark's Confession of Faith. In the accompanying email, Mark wrote, "No doubt, this exercise was helpful for me, both joyous and eye-opening as it was hurtful and confusing. How does one put thoughts on paper, especially in the midst of a time at sea in faith?"<sup>54</sup> Unlike every other confession I

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<sup>53</sup> "Annie", e-mail message to author, March 19, 2014.

<sup>54</sup> "Mark", e-mail message to author, April 20, 2014.

received, Mark's left every question unanswered, opened new queries, and exposed the harsh reality of his ongoing struggle. I found myself wondering, "If I had known that this process could result in *disbelief*, would I have done things differently? Do I think the wider church should be more cautious about how *they* approach this generation and their complicated beliefs? Should the church welcome confessions of doubt with the same enthusiasm as confessions of doubt?"

It was during this time that I heard Dr. Irvin's words anew. I simply assumed that because I wasn't working with other religions, I didn't need to open myself up to the possibility of being converted to another faith. All the while, I overlooked the other remaining possibility: being converted to no faith. In that moment, I had to truly ask myself, if I wanted to convert my NEXTers to a life of deep faith, was I willing to be converted to a life of deep questioning? If I wanted these young adults to claim Jesus Christ, was I willing to claim the darkness that came with their doubt? I knew the answer had to be yes.

If the church wants Millennials to take her seriously, then the church needs to take Millennials seriously. We need to take their Confessions of Faith and Doubt and treat them with the same urgency and authority as the ones we print in our constitution for they also carry crucial wisdom for the church. This means hearing the questions they pose, the critiques they make, and the Gospel they preach, and allowing ourselves to be converted by them as well. We cannot let a project like this serve as a bone we throw in the direction of a group of people we are hoping to fill our pews again. We cannot let an endeavor like this be a fun experiment we do to appease the participants. We need to call upon the confessions of this generation, not just because *they* need to make their

confessions but because *we* need to hear them. If we are truly the Reformed church, then it is high time we start empowering some new Reformers. Reformers like Sam, Drew, Anna, Abby, and, Lizzie, but most of all Reformers like Mark.

The church is at a very scary juncture in its history. We are barely able to keep the lights on and retain our members. Many predict our imminent extinction. But as long as the world needs to hear the Gospel, the church will be in business. That doesn't mean it will be the church we are familiar or comfortable with. It might mean that we have to change the way we do things, the voices we listen to, and the issues we devote our energies to. It might mean allowing ourselves to be converted before we even think of converting anyone else.

For all the gloom and doom that has been said about the most "unchurched" generation in all of history, we have failed to point out that these Millennials have not given up on God. They may not be regularly praying the Lord's Prayer, but they are still praying. They may not be actively confessing the Apostle's Creed, but they are confessing their desire to be apostles. They may not be absolutely certain that God is there, but they are still looking. Therefore it is precisely for Millennials like Mark that this project exists: not to make him a Christian but to help him look for God. And if by some miracle, Mark finds God, it will not be because of anything the church has done. It will be because God found Mark and I can think of nothing more worthy to confess than that.

## CHAPTER 7

### A MILLENNIAL PASTOR / A MILLENNIAL'S PASTOR

*If you ask me what I believe, if you ask me what I know, I know my Lord, my Savior, my Help through the people that have been graciously put in my life. I could write this entire confession over and over again using just the names of my friends, just the names of my co-workers, just the names of people who have crossed my path once. I feel blessed that God, Jesus, and the Spirit can be found anywhere and everywhere.*

*And it is for all these amazing proofs of divine existence that I confess my faith in the one who lives, died, and lives again.*

~Charlene

My personal religious history can be summed up in periods of great highs and great lows: times of intense belief and serious doubt, years of active church involvement and years of rebellion against organized religion, feelings of adoration for God and anger towards God. The journey I have taken to become a pastor has been colored with great struggle and frustration. However, I am certain that I wouldn't be the pastor, let alone the person I am today without these challenges. It is from this place of personal experience that my project was born and came alive.

There is a great misconception that if you choose to go into ministry, that you don't have your own issues with faith, the church, religion and God. Most of the participants of *Profess & Confess* simply assumed I was there to give them answers and tell them what to believe. I would venture to say that most of the participants wanted me

to give them answers and tell them what to believe, but I couldn't. Because of my own questions and doubts, I knew how important and necessary it was for each of the participants to face their faith head on. Yet in order for them to do that, I had to be intentional about how I was going to shepherd them through the process. While I could relate to their experiences, it doesn't mean that I was equipped to lead them to the other side.

### **Religious Educator**

The first aspect of my pastoral identity that I was committed to developing further for the sake of my project was my role as a religious educator. While the hope was to inspire these young adults to pursue their own faith formation, I knew that a strong educational component was going to be a huge part of that process. To hone that skill, I engaged in one-on-one conversations where I listened to the needs, fears, and anxieties of individual participants and diagnosed appropriate responses and strategies to meet the individual's needs and allay his or her fears.

My goal was to complete at least 7 conversations. I had 10 conversations and am still actively following up on the conversations I have already had as well as initiating new conversations. This was one of the most valuable aspects of this project for me. Having gone through the experience of questioning my faith myself and re-evaluating everything I believed as a youth, I could empathize with many of the young adults who went through this process. These one-on-one conversations became like spiritual therapy where I was the therapist listening to the history of the patient and figuring out where it all went awry. Most importantly, I realized through these conversations that the doubts

and fears were much more emotional than they were intellectual. For example, one of the conversations I had revealed that the young woman had been raped and couldn't reconcile this atrocity with the notion of a good and faithful god.

Acknowledging that my intuition alone wouldn't be enough, I set out to research other tried and true methods gleaned and developed by professionals. My goal was to research at least 3 books. I found *Introduction to Christian Education: Foundations for the Twenty-First Century* very useful because it was a collection of articles and represented a diversity of opinion that reflected my test group. I also learned a lot from *Learning to Listen, Learning to Teach* because it focused on a dialogical model that capitalized on the Millennial desire to participate. For example, its emphasis on "immediacy of the learning"<sup>55</sup> and "respect for learners as decision makers"<sup>56</sup> speaks to and reflects the consumerist tendency of young adults as well as their assumption that they know everything.

Finally, *A Theology For Christian Education* helped to theologically center my teaching in such a way that it was ultimately distinctly Christian and not just perpetuating the ongoing error of pandering to this generation. For example, in response to one the most pressing concerns of young adult in regards to religion is the exclusion of other faiths. Yet Ferré rightly grounds the tendency to give up specific beliefs in the name of accepting all beliefs by acknowledging that we were created in the image of God and it is in this created body that we self-identify and learn about God, our neighbor, and creation.<sup>57</sup> It was important for me to remember that while God uses all religions to

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<sup>55</sup> Jane Vella, *Learning to Listen, Learning to Teach: The Power of Dialogue in Educating Adults* (San Francisco: John Wiley & Sons, 2002), 236.

<sup>56</sup> Jane Vella, *Learning to Listen, Learning to Teach*, 15.

<sup>57</sup> Nels F.S. Ferré, *A Theology for Christian Education* (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1967), 15.

“prepare for the understanding and the growth of this image,” my project was to clarify the call to faithfulness for who resonate with the person of Jesus.<sup>58</sup>

Finally, taking the conversations I had and the researched I had performed, I set out to write my daily emails employing the different learning methods I had learned. My goal was to complete 1 lesson plan yet I began to see each of my emails as a lesson plan. However, I will highlight 2 emails because they employ different learning methods that speak to different types of learners. The email sent oregarding the Trinity answers the Analytical Learner’s driving question: *What do I need to know?*<sup>59</sup> It presented a logical and clear explanation of a complicated concept.

Whereas the email on own images of Jesus made room for the Dynamic Learner’s hopeful question: *What can this become?*<sup>60</sup> The experimental learners in the group embraced the opportunity to put their creativity to work while they drew a picture of God, reflected on that image, and the re-drew it with new guidance. Each email could not have been tailored to the diversity of learners in my group, but my hope was that by employing different learning styles throughout the project, I was able to fully engage everyone’s specific learning style at one point or another.

### **Spiritual Leader**

While there was an obvious emphasis on education in this project, I knew that every lesson plan, email, and exercise had to be grounded in deep faith and spiritual health. My ability to guide this group in a spiritual manner was largely dependent on whether or not I was actively engaging my own spiritual health. Thus, throughout the

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<sup>58</sup> Ibid.,19.

<sup>59</sup> Michael J. Anthony, ed, *Introducing Christian Education*, 134.

<sup>60</sup> Ibid., 136.

project, I committed myself to keeping a prayer journal. My goal was to journal at least 3-5 days a week. This practice was the most difficult for me as I was constantly researching and writing devotionals. I was so focused on the participant experience that I was less inclined to take care of myself. While I kept a prayer journal, I wasn't as consistent as I would have liked to be. However, I found that writing and developing the exercises became an act of worship and reflection that renewed me throughout the project.

But the most powerful spiritual practice for me throughout this process was leading a retreat for the women in NEXT in the Pocono Mountains from February 21-22, 2014. I ultimately decided to hold the retreat with just women because I was finding from my one-on-one conversations that many of the obstacles and anxieties were gender specific. NEXT is comprised primarily of women (approximately 80%) and I felt it would be most beneficial to take this group of 15 women out of the city and away from men in order to delve in deeper. During this overnight retreat, we were able to really unpack many of the destructive un-truths about God and ourselves and replace them with life-giving truths.

### **Technology/Social Media Management**

Working with millennials requires that I become highly adept in social media and technology. In order to engage regularly, if not daily, with this group, I will work to utilize the best technological and social media tools available to me. Initially, my goal was to update a blog for my demonstration project. This was perhaps the biggest change that had to be made in the midst of this project. After several discussions with my

Millennial “experts”, we came to the conclusion that most of the participants of this project would not go out of their way to visit the blog on a daily basis. Instead, the blog had to come to them in the form of an email complete with content as well as interactive exercises. The content can be turned into a blog, but for busy young professionals, a daily devotional email ended up being a much smarter choice.

In addition to the emails, I used Facebook to continue the conversation. Once a hub of event information and social announcements, the NEXT Facebook page has now become an interactive forum on all things faith (and even beyond). In the summer of 2013, I began building buzz by posting articles on the NEXT Facebook page. The most ideal outcome would not be me posting articles every week, but NEXTers taking it upon themselves to do the same. Within a few weeks of my posting articles this begin happening. The success of this strategy is an active online dialogue which has gone beyond what I could have imagined or hoped for and is still ongoing today.

### **A Millennial Pastor or A Millennial’s Pastor?**

As I worked on my own personal development throughout this project, I continuously asked myself if my identity was founded in being a Millennial pastor or a pastor to Millennials. How heavily should I draw from my own experience as a Millennial? Was it more important to stay at a safe distance as their pastor or be vulnerable as a fellow young adult? In the end, I eschewed those questions and chose areas of growth that would challenge and encourage me to become the kind of pastor who could engage and educate on the tough topics in a modern and relevant way while being grounded in my own faith practice. Every leg of this journey contributed to be further

becoming this pastor. Not only do I feel more empowered and equipped to have the hard conversations with my young adults about their faith and their doubts, I feel like I can convene these conversations effectively en masse on social media as well. Furthermore, every conversation I have had, every article I have posted, every book I have read has further encouraged my own spirituality and made me more convicted of my own confession of faith.

## CONCLUSION

Grounded in the person, work, life and death of Jesus Christ, I know, I believe, I am certain that God is with us in the flesh. While Scripture has helped me see this and while tradition helps me witness it, I have experienced God incarnate through the people I am blessed to live my life with.

In my parents, I know what God as mother and father truly means. I haven't always had the easiest or best relationship with them, nor with God for that matter, but they were the only people in my life who saw more in me than I could ever have hoped for and dreamed for myself. Often times, this confidence, this commandment for me to be better, more faithful, more fully me was a heavy load for me to bear. But in my mother's and father's eyes, I see myself as God sees me, cherished and beautiful. And when I look at my parents, I see God more clearly, as One who would protect me at all costs, adores me with every fiber of God's divine being, and created me to be special. I know and love God through my parents.

In my sisters, I know the dynamic and undeniable existence of the Holy Spirit. The Spirit follows me into the unexpected places in my life providing me laughter, joy, and love that I would never have discovered on my own. The Spirit is moving constantly through phone calls, texts, emails, photos, and even Facebook pings, reminding me that I am

never alone. Even when I am sitting in a crowded subway full of strangers, someone's smile will remind me of my sisters. Even when I am completely alone in my office doing work, a song will come on that will speak straight to my heart. If God's presence is above me, Jesus's presence is within me, the Spirit's presence is right beside me. I know and love the Spirit through my sisters, Cheryl and Christine.

In my husband, I know what the painstakingly and unconditional love of Jesus Christ looks like. I haven't always been kind to him, good to him, and even loyal to him, but my kindness, goodness and loyalty were never the reasons behind his love for me. A truth I learned in when time after time after time he forgave me for not loving him as fully as he loves me. I have come to realize that I might never love him with the purity and self-sacrificial nature in which he loves me, and for a time, that bothered me. I didn't want to accept love that was without cost, grace that was free, and forgiveness that was unmerited, but now I see there is no other way to live and be. I know and love Jesus Christ through my husband, Jordan.

*In my daughter, I now know the unconditional, overwhelming care God has for all us. When I look at the miracle that she is, the wonder in her eyes, the beauty that emanates from every limb on her body, I experience what God feels when God sees me. I would move heaven and earth for her to know just how incredibly loved and precious she is, but I don't have to do that because God has done that and more for her. I never knew what unconditional love was until I met my daughter. I would die for her in an instant. I*

*would hold her in my arms forever if I could. I know and love every person of God through my baby, Amelie.*

If you ask me what I believe, if you ask me what I know, I know my Lord, my Savior, my Helper through the people that have been graciously put in my life. I could write this entire confession over and over again using just the names of my friends, just the names of my co-workers, just the names of people who have crossed my path once. I feel blessed that God, Jesus, and the Spirit can be found anywhere and everywhere.

And it is for all these amazing proofs of divine existence that I confess my faith in the one who lives, died, and lives again.

~Charlene Han Powell  
May 19, 2014  
(italicized portion added in January of 2015)

## APPENDICES